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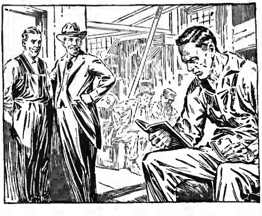

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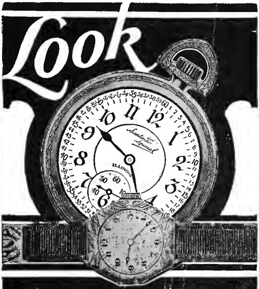

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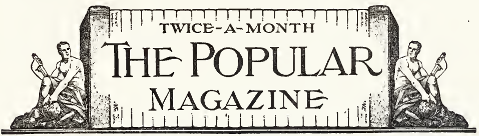

TWICE-A-MONTH
THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

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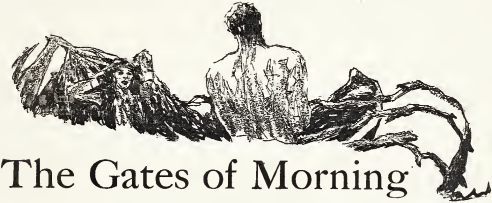

The Gates of Morning

By H. de Vere Stacpoole

Author of "Gold and the Girl," "The Garden of God," Etc.

In this latest romance of the South Seas, Mr. Stacpoole has set himself a pretty problem. It is this: Given a boy and a girl of civilized parentage, but reared in a savage setting and ignorant of everything excepting the teachings of nature and the promptings of instinct, what is likely to happen? It seems a broad question. The temptation is to answer, "Almost anything." But the answer would be false. The conditions of the problem impose elusive but none the less definite limitations. Stacpoole has recognized what those limitations are. Nothing happens in this story of the young rulers of Karolin that outrages or ignores the original premise. Taori—Dick Lestrange—is the son of castaways who die before he is old enough to remember them. Kearney, the old sailor marooned with him, brings him up. He knows no other companionship until Katafa is blown onto Palm Tree Island from Karolin, the great atoll to the south. Katafa is as ignorant of her parentage as Dick. Neither questions the past or the future any more than a wild animal inquires what has gone before or what is to come. Katafa, if you had asked, would have said she was a member of the Karolin tribe. She knew nothing of the Spanish mother and father who had died when their ship was attacked by the war canoes of the islanders. Chance threw these two foster children of the wild together on Palm Tree. Chance left them alone there when old Kearney met his end in the clutches of the octopus. And chance drove them from Palm Tree and set them over the island nation of Karolin to be its savage king and queen. One thing only marked a difference between this new régime and those the island tribe had always known. In the veins of Taori and Katafa ran the blood of the white man, in their nerves pulsed the instincts of the ruling races, and in their brains lay a sleeping heritage of power. Dormant in them were the potentialities of civilized ancestry waiting the touch of awakening vicissitude to spring to action. How these potentialities were jarred to life and what came of them is the story you will read in "THE GATES OF MORNING," as stirring a tale of life and action as we have ever read.—THE EDITOR.

(A Four-Part Story—Part I.)

CHAPTER I.

THE CANOE BUILDER.

DICK, standing on a ledge of coral, cast his eyes to the south.

Behind him the breakers of the outer sea thundered and the spindrift scattered on the wind; before him stretched an ocean calm as a lake, infinite, blue and flown about by the fishing gulls—the lagoon of Karolin.

Clipped by its forty-mile ring of coral this great pond was a sea in itself, a sea of storm in heavy winds, a lake of azure, in light airs—and it was his. He who had landed here only yesterday.

Women, children, youths, all the tribe to be seen busy along the beach in the blazing sun, fishing with nets, playing their games or working on the paraka patches, all were his people. His were the canoes drawn up on the sand and his the empty houses where the war canoes had once rested on their rollers.

Then as he cast his eyes from the lagoon to the canoe houses his brow contracted, and, turning his back to the lagoon, he stood facing the breakers on the outer beach and the northern sea. Away there, beyond the sea line, invisible, lay Palm Tree, an island beautiful as a dream, yet swarming with devils.

Little Tari, the son of Le Taioi the net maker, sitting on the coral close by, looked up at him. Tari knew little of life, but he knew that all the men of Karolin swept away by war had left the women and the boys and the children like himself defenseless and without a man or leader.

Then, yesterday, from the northern sea in a strange boat and with Katafa, the girl who had been blown to sea years ago when out fishing, this strange new figure had come, sent by the gods, so the women said, to be their chief and ruler.

The child knew nothing of whom the gods might be nor did he care. Alone now with this wonderful new person, and out of earshot of his mother, he put the question direct with all the simplicity of childhood.

"Taori," said little Tari, "who are you?"

Could Dick have answered, would the child have understood the strange words of the strange story Dick might have told him? "Tari, I come of people beyond the world you know. My name is Dick Lestrange, and when I was smaller than you, Tari, I was left alone with an old sailorman on that island you call Marua—Palm Tree—which lies beyond sight fifty miles to the north. There we lived and there I grew to be a boy, and Kearney, that was his name, taught me to fish and spear fish, and he made for me things to play with, little ships unlike the canoes of the island. And then, Tari, one day long ago came Katafa, the girl who was blown away from here in a storm. She lived with us till Kearney died, and then we two were alone. She taught me her language, which is the language of Karolin. She named me Taori; we loved one another and might have lived forever at Marua had not a great ship come there filled with bad men, men from the eastern islands of Melanesia. They came to cut the trees. Then they rose and killed the white men with them and burned the ship and in our boat we escaped from them, taking with us everything we loved, even the little ships, and steering for Karolin, we came, led by the lagoon light in the sky."

But he could not tell Tari this, or at least all of it, for the very name of Dick had passed from his memory; that and the language he had spoken as a child; Kearney, the sailor who had brought him up, was all but forgotten, all but lost sight of in the luminous haze that was his past.

The past, for men long shipwrecked and alone, becomes blurred and fogged. For Dick it began only with the coming of Katafa to Marua. Behind and beyond that all was forgotten as though consumed in the great blaze of tropic light that bathed the island and the sea, the storms that swept the coconut groves, the mists of the rainy seasons. Kearney would have been quite forgotten but for the little ships he had made as playthings for the boy—who was now a man.

He looked down at the questioning child. "I am Taori, Tari tatu. Why do you ask?"

"I do not know," said the child. "I ask as I breathe, but no big folk will ever answer the questions of Tari—— Ai, the fish!" His facile mind already had dropped the subject, attracted by the cries of some children hauling in a net, and he rose and trotted away.

Dick turned his gaze again to the north. The question of the child had stirred his mind and he saw again the schooner that had put in to Palm Tree only to be burned by the Melanesian hands; he saw again Katafa and himself as they made their escape in the old dinghy that Kearney had taught him to handle as a boy. He saw their landing on this beach, yesterday, and the women and children swarming round him—he the man whom they considered sent by the gods to be their chief and leader.

Then as he gazed toward the north the memory of the men he had escaped from with the girl stained the beauty of sea and sky.

There was no immediate fear of the men who had taken possession of Palm Tree. The men of Palm Tree had no canoes, but they would build canoes, surely they would build canoes, and as surely they would see the far mirror blaze of Karolin lagoon in the sky, just as he had seen it, and they would come. It might be a very long time yet, but they would come.

Dick was, in all but blood, a Kanaka, a savage—and yet the white man was there. He could think forward, he could think round a subject and he could imagine possibilities.

That was why he had sent a canoe that morning across to the southern beach to fetch Aioma, Palia and Tafata, three old men, too old for war but expert canoe builders. That was why, when gazing at the tribe in full congregation, his eyes had brightened to the fact that nearly a hundred of the youths were ripening to war age, but under all, lighting and animating his mind, raising daring to eagle heights, lay his passion for Katafa, his other self more dear to him than self, threatened, ever so vaguely, yet still threatened.

War canoes! Did he intend fighting any invaders in the lagoon or as they drew toward shore, or did he vaguely intend to be the attacker, destroying the danger at its source before it could develop? Who knows?

A hand fell upon his shoulder, and turning, he found himself face to face with Katafa. A lock of her dark hair escaped from the thread of elastic vine that bound it, blew right back on the breeze like an eagle's feather, and her eyes, luminous and dark, instead of meeting his were fixed toward the point where he had been gazing—the due-north sea line.

"Look!" said Katafa.

At big intervals and in certain conditions of weather Palm Tree, though far behind the sea line, became visible from Karolin through mirage. Last evening they had seen it and now again it was beginning to bloom, to come to life, a mysterious stain low down in the northern sky, a dull spot in the sea dazzle, that deepened by degrees and hardened till, as if sketched in by some unseen painter, against the misty background of the sky, the island showed beautiful as a dream; diaphanous, yet vivid.

With her hand upon his shoulder they stood without speaking, their minds untutored, knowing nothing of mirage, their eyes fixed on the place from which they had escaped and which was rising now so strangely beyond the far sea line as if to gaze at them.

They saw again the horde of savages on the beach, figures monstrous as the forms in a nightmare; they felt again the wind that filled the sail as the dinghy raced for safety and the open sea, and again they heard the yells of the Melanesians mad with rum stolen from the schooner they had brought in, and which they had burned. And there, there before them lay the scene of the tragedy, that lovely picture which showed nothing of the demons that still inhabited it.

Then as Dick gazed on this loveliness, which was yet a threat and a warning, his nostrils expanded and his eyes grew dark with hate. They had threatened him—that was nothing; they had threatened Katafa—that was everything—and they still threatened her.

Some day they would come. The vision of Palm Tree seemed to repeat what instinct told him. They would build canoes, and seeing the lagoon mirror light in the sky, they would come. They had no women, those men, and here were women, and instinct half whispered to him that just as he had been drawn to Katafa, so would these men be drawn to the women of Karolin. They would scan the horizon in search of some island whose tribe might be raided of its women, and seeing the lagoon light they would come.

Ah, if he had known, danger lay not only to the north, but wherever greed or hatred might roam on that azure sea, not only among savages, but among the wolves of civilization.

To Dick there was no world beyond the world of water that ringed the two islands; no Europe, no America, no history but the history of his short life and the life of Katafa, and yet even in that life, short as it was, he had learned to dread men and he had envisaged the foundation of all history—man's instinct for war, rapine and destruction.

Then gradually the vision of Palm Tree began to fade and pass, suddenly it vanished like a light blown out and as they turned from the sea to the lagoon, Katafa pointed across the lagoon water to a canoe approaching with flashing paddles from the southern beach.

It was the canoe Dick had sent for the canoe builders and, leaving the coral, they came down to the white sand of the inner beach to meet it.

CHAPTER II.

THE REVOLT OF THE OLD MEN.

TWO women were in it, and as they drove it ashore beaching it with the outrigger a-tilt, Dick, followed by Katafa, approached, and resting his hand on the mast stays attached to the outrigger gratings, he turned to the women, who, springing out, stood, paddles in hand, looking from him to Katafa.

"And the builders?" asked he. "Where are they?"

The shorter woman clucked her tongue and turned her face away toward the lagoon. The taller one looked Dick straight in the face.

"They will not come," said she. "They say Uta Matu alone was their king and he is dead, also they say they are too old. *A mataya ayana* they are feeble and near past the fishing, even the fishing in the quiet water."

The shorter woman choked as if over a laugh, then she turned straight to Dick.

"They will not come, Taori. All else is talk."

She was right. The express order had gone to them to cross over and they refused. They would not acknowledge the newcomer as their chief. All else was talk.

Several villagers, seeing the canoe beaching, had run up and were listening; more were coming along. Already the subject was under whispered discussion among the group by the canoe, while Dick, his foot resting on the slightly tilted outrigger, stood, his eyes fixed on the sennit binding of the outrigger pole as if studying it profoundly.

The blaze of anger that had come into his eyes on hearing the news had passed. Anger had given place to thought.

This was no ordinary business. Dick had never heard the word "revolt," nor the word "authority," but he could think quite well without them. The only men who could direct the building of the big war canoes refused to work, and from the tone and looks of the women who brought the message he saw quite clearly that if something were not done to bring the canoe builders to heel, his power to make the natives do things would be gone.

Dick never wasted much time in thought. He turned from the canoe, raced up to the house where the little ships were carefully stored and came racing back with a fish spear.

Then, calling to the women, he helped to run the canoe out, sprang on board and helped to raise the sail to the wind coming in from the break.

"I will soon return," he cried to Katafa, his voice borne across the sparkling water on a slant of the wind, then, the women crouched down to ballast the canoe and with the steering paddle in his hand, he steered.

The canoe that had brought Katafa drifting to Palm Tree years ago had been the first South Sea island craft that the boy had seen. The fascination of it had remained with him. This canoe was bigger, broader of beam, and the long skate-shaped piece of wood that formed the outrigger was connected with it not by outrigger poles but by a bridge.

Dick, as he steered, took in every little detail, the rattans of the grating, the way the mast stays were fixed to the grating and how the mast itself was stepped, the outrigger and the curve of its ends, the mat sail and the way it was fastened to the yard.

Though he had never steered a canoe before, the sea craft inborn in him carried him through and the women crouching and watching and noting every detail saw nothing indicative of indecision.

Now, there are two ways in which one may upset a canoe of this sort by bad handling. One is to let the outrigger leave the water and tilt too high in the air, the other is to let the outrigger dip too deep in the water.

Dick seemed to know, and as they crossed the big lift of sea coming in with the flood from the break he avoided both dangers.

The beach where the remnants of the southern tribe lived was exactly opposite to the beach of the northern tribe, and as both beaches were close to the break in the reef the distance from one to the other was little over a mile. Then as they drew close Dick could see more distinctly the few remaining huts under the shelter of a grove of jack-fruit trees, beyond the jack fruit stood pandanus palms bending lagoonward, and three tall coconut palms sharp against the white up-flaring horizon.

As the canoe beached, Dick saw the rebels. They were seated on the sand close to the most easterly of the huts, seated in the shadow of the jack-fruit leaves; three old men seated, two with their knees up and one tailor fashion, while close to them by the edge of the little pool lay a girl.

As Dick drew near, followed by the taller of the boat women, the girl who had been gazing into the waters of the pool looked up.

She was Le Moan, granddaughter of Le Juan, the witch woman of Karolin now dead and gone to meet judgment for the destruction she had caused. Le Moan was only fourteen. She had heard of the coming of the new ruler to Karolin and of his bringing with him Katafa, the girl long thought to be dead. She had heard the order given to her grandfather Aioma that morning to come at once to the northern beach as the new chief required canoes to be built, and she had heard the old man's refusal. Le Moan had wondered what this new chief might be like. The monstrous great figure of Uta Matu, last king of Karolin, had come up in memory at the word "chief," and now as the canoe was hauled up and the women cried out "He comes!" she saw Dick.

Dick with the sun on his face and on his red-gold hair, Dick honey colored, lithe as a panther and straight as a stabbing spear. Dick with his eyes fixed on the three old men of Karolin who had turned their heads to gaze on him.

Le Moan drew in her breath, then she seemed to cease breathing as the vision approached, passed her without a word and stood facing Aioma, the eldest and the greatest of the canoe builders.

Le Moan was only fourteen, yet she was tall almost as Katafa. She was not a true Polynesian; though her mother had been a native of Karolin, her father, a sailor from a Spanish ship destroyed years ago by Uta Matu, had given the girl European characteristics so strong that she stood apart from the other islanders as a pine might stand among palm trees.

She was beautiful, with a dark beauty just beginning to unfold from the bud and she was strange as the sea depths themselves. Sometimes, seated alone beneath the towering jack fruits, her head would poise as though she were listening, as though some voice were calling through the sound of the surf on the reef, some voice whose words she could not quite catch, and sometimes she would sit above the reef pools gazing deep down into the water, the crystal water where coralline growths bloomed and fish swam, but where she seemed to see more things than fish.

The sharp mixture of two utterly alien races sometimes produces strange results; it was almost at times as if Le Moan were confused by voices or visions from lands of ancestry worlds apart.

She would go with Aioma fishing and, with her on board, Aioma never dreaded losing sight of land, for Le Moan was a pathfinder.

Blindfold her on the coral and she would yet find her way on foot, take her beyond the sea line and she would return like a homing pigeon. Like the pigeon she had a compass in her brain.

This was the only gift she had received from her mother, La Jonabon, who had received it from seafaring ancestors of the remote past.

Crouching by the well she saw now Dick standing before Aioma and heard his voice.

"You are Aioma?" said Dick, who had singled the chief of the three out by instinct.

The three old men rose to their feet. The sight of the newcomer helped, but it was the singling out of Aioma with such success by one who had never seen him that produced the effect. Surely here was a chief.

"I am Aioma," replied the other. "What want you with me?"

"That which the women had already told you," replied Dick, who hated waste of words or repeating himself.

"They told me of the new chief who had come to the northern beach, and of how he had ordered canoes to be built," said Aioma, "and I said I am too old, and Uta is dead, and I know no chief but Uta; also, in the last war on that island in the north all the men of Karolin fell and they have never returned, they nor their canoes. So what is the use of building more canoes when there are no men to fill them?"

"The men are growing," said Dick.

"Aye, they are growing," grumbled Aioma, "but it will be many moons before they are ready to take the paddle and the spear—and even so, where is the enemy? The sea is clear."

"Aioma," said Dick, "I have come from there," pointing to the north. "The sea is not clear."

"You have come from Marua?"

"I have come from Marua, where one day Katafa came, drifted from here in her canoe; there we lived till a little while ago when men landed, killing and breaking and burning—burning even the big canoe they had come in. Then Katafa and I set sail for Karolin, for Karolin called me to rule her people."

"And the men who landed to kill and burn?" asked Aioma.

"They are still on Marua. They have no canoes, but they will build them, and surely they will come."

Neither of Aioma's companions said a word while Aioma stood looking at the ground as if consulting it. Then his eyes rose to Dick's face. Age and war had made Aioma wise; he knew men and he knew Truth when he saw her.

"I will do your bidding, Taori," said he quite simply. Then he turned to the others, spoke some words to them, giving directions what to do till his return, and led the way to the canoe.

Le Moan, still crouching by the well, said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on Dick, this creature so new, so different from any one she had ever seen. Perhaps the race spirit was telling her that here was a being of her father's race miraculously come to Karolin, perhaps she was held simply by the grace and youth of the newcomer—who knows?

Dick, as he turned, noticed her fully for the first time and as their eyes met he paused, held by her gaze and the strangeness of her appearance, so different from that of the other natives. For a moment his mind seemed trapped, then as his eyes fell he passed on, and taking the steering paddle pushed off, the wind from the reef break filling the sail of the canoe.

Le Moan, rising and shading her eyes, stood watching as the sail grew less across the sparkling water, watching as the canoe rose and fell on the swell setting in from the break, watching as it reached the far white line of the northern beach where Katafa was waiting for the return of her lover.

CHAPTER III.

THE LITTLE SHIPS.

THE primitive canoe of the Pacific is a dugout. The trunk of a tree hollowed and shaped into the form of a boat, so narrow in proportion to its length as to be absolutely unstable but for the outrigger.

The outrigger, a long skate-shaped piece of wood fixed to port—always to port—by poles on a central bridge is an apology to the sea for want of beam, and the sea accepts it—on conditions. But for the outrigger, no canoe of any size would dare the sea, but for it the island would have been sealed as between island and island and between island and continent.

Far away in the remote past some man once stood, the father of this daring invention, little dreaming of the vast consequences of the work to which he had put his hand.

Dick at the steering paddle saw a figure on the northern beach as they drew near. It was Katafa, waiting for him, the wind blowing her girdle of dracæna leaves and her hand sheltering her eyes against the sun. Standing just as Le Moan was standing on the southern beach, sheltering her eyes and watching the canoe that carried the first man who had ever made her turn her head.

Some children were playing near Katafa and a fishing canoe was putting out near by, but he only saw Katafa.

"Katafa," said Aioma, who was crouched by the after outrigger pole. "It is she, sure enough, and they said she was dead and that her ghost had returned, bringing you with her, Taori, but the dead do not return. Katafa, she was the girl under the taboo of taminan, the girl no man or woman might touch, and then one day she went fishing beyond the reef and a storm took her and she was drowned, so they said."

"She was not drowned," replied Dick. "The wind blew her to Marua, where I was, I and another whose face I have near forgotten, Kearney, he was called, and he made canoes, but not like these; then one day he went among the trees and did not return. Then the god Nan came to the island and after him the men of Karolin who fought together so that all were killed, and then came the bad men, as I have told you, and would have killed us but we left Marua in the night—look, there is the canoe we came in." He pointed to the dinghy hauled up on the beach.

"O he! Taori!" It was Katafa's voice hailing them from the shore, glad, sweet, clear as a bell, yet far carrying as the voice of a gull.

As Dick sprang out on the sands he seized her in his arms. Parted only a few hours, it seemed to them that they had been weeks apart.

In the old days, even before he was born, his mother Emmeline had never been at ease when separated from his father even by the breadth of the lagoon; the demon that hints of mischance seemed always at her ear.

Dick seemed to have inherited with his power of love for Katafa something of the dread of mischance for the beloved.

He embraced her, heedless of onlookers, though the only eyes to see were the eyes of the children and of Aioma, who had eyes for nothing but the dinghy.

As soon as his foot touched sand the canoe builder made for it, running like a boy, clapped his hand on the gunnel and then ran it over the planking.

The boats of the Spanish ship of long ago had been clinker built and had been destroyed in the fight, but he had seen bits of them washed ashore on the southern beach. The dinghy was carvel built and entire, a perfect specimen of eastern boat building over which the canoe designer brooded, forgetful of Dick and Katafa, the beach he stood on and the sun that lit it.

The idea of a boat built of planking and not hollowed out of a tree trunk had been presented to him by the charred and shattered fragments of the Spanish boats, but how to get planking and how to bend it to the form he desired was beyond his imagination and beyond his means. He saw vaguely that these boats of the papalagi were made somewhat after the fashion of a man, with a backbone and ribs and a covering for the ribs, he saw that by this means enough beam could be obtained to enable the builder to dispense with the outrigger—but then speed, where was there sign of speed in this thing squat and ugly?

In the early ages of the world in which Aioma still dwelt ugliness had only two expressions, the lines that indicated want of speed and the lines that indicated want of strength.

Dick, though brown as the canoe builder and almost to be mistaken for a true islander, was perhaps a million years younger than Aioma, just as the dinghy was a million years younger than the fishing canoe that had just brought him across the lagoon. In Dick, Aioma saw the lines that indicated speed and strength, nothing more. He was blind to the nobility of type expressed by that daring face, to the far sight of the eyes and the breadth of the brow. In the dinghy Aioma saw want of speed; he was blind to the nobility of type that made this bud the sister of a battleship, made it a vertebrate, as against the dugout which has neither keel nor ribs.

Then, Aioma, standing in the sun, a plain canoe builder and workman in the sight of God and a critic as every true workman is, began to deride the dinghy, at first with chuckles deep down in his throat, then with a sound like the clucking of a hen, then with laughter long and loud and words of derision.

"Which end is which of this pig fish?" inquired Aioma of Heaven and Dick. "And he who made her, how many more did he make like her?"

Dick, who had always connected the dinghy with Kearney, and who had a sort of faith that Kearney had made her just as he had made the little model ships, winced at the laughter of the old man. Perhaps it was the white man in him revolting at the derision of a savage over the works of the white man; however that may be, he turned and ran up the beach to the house of Uta Matu which he and Katafa had made their own. There in the shadow, on a hastily constructed shelf, stood the little model ships he had so carefully salved from Palm Tree—the frigate, the schooner, the full-rigged ship and the whaleman, the last thread connecting him with civilization; toys of the long ago, but no longer toys—fetishes from a world whose very language he had lost, a world of sun and tall trees where like a ghost in the sun dazzle moved a memory that was once a man—Kearney.

He took the schooner from its rest and coming out with it, ran to a great pool in the coral, calling Aioma to come and see what he who made the dinghy had also made.

The pool thirty feet long by twenty broad was ruffled by the breeze from the sea, it was clear as crystal, coral floored, and a trapped school of tiny fish no larger than needles passed like a silver cloud here and there. Dick, on his knees, launched the schooner and Aioma standing bent with a hand on each knee watched her as she floated on an even keel. Then on the merry west wind, with helm properly set and main boom guyed out, she went sailing down the pool to the east end, where Katafa had run to receive her.

Aioma watched. Then Dick, running to the other end, showed him how she could sail almost against the wind. Dick knew every stick and string of her, how to hoist and lower main and fore and how to set the head sails—had you placed him on a real schooner he could have worked her from his knowledge of the model—and Aioma watched, vastly intrigued. Then, taking a hand, he got on his knees and the great sun saw the builders of the future fleet of Karolin playing like children, while the little schooner, on its imitation sea, sailed from port to port, bowing to the ripples of the pool as the lost *Raratanga,* of which it was the model, had bowed to the swell of the great Pacific.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GATES OF MORNING.

THE break on the reef of Karolin faced due east. Like a harbor mouth it stood, the only entrance to the lagoon, and through it at ebb and flood the sea raced, dancing round the coral piers, pouring in and out swift as a river in spate.

When the sun rose he looked straight through the break, and the river of gold from him came level across the dancing waves of the outer sea, rose at the break, as a river rises to flood the coral piers and palms, passed through and spread on the quiet waters of the lagoon.

Mayaya Amyana—the Way—or the Gates—of Morning. Ages ago the name had been given to the break and the people who gave it were not speaking in the language of poetry, but of truth, for the one great thing that entered these gates was not the moon, now shriveled, now full, now absent; nor the tides that altered in time and size; but the morning, eternal, changeless and triumphant.

This great sea gate was more to the people of Karolin than a way of ingress and outgoing. It had a significance deep, almost religious and based on the experiences of a thousand years, for it was the way to an outer world of which they knew little or nothing, and through it came not only the tides of the sea and the first light of the sun, but also whatever they knew or had known of the world beyond.

The Spanish ship had come in, strange beyond belief, and canoes from the Paumotus had brought war through it. Trouble came through the Gates of Morning no less than joy, and all the dead who had died at sea had passed through them never to return.

To Le Moan, just as to Aioma and the others, the sea gate of Karolin was a way and a mystery; a road, yet almost a sacred temple.

But through the Gates of Morning came other things than ships and men.

Sometimes on a dead calm night and generally at full of moon Karolin lagoon would wake to the sound of thunder, thunder shaking the coral and rolling back in echoes from the far reef, not the thunder of nature, but the thunder of big guns as though fleets were at war on the outer sea.

Then if you came out on the beach you would see the shells bursting in the lagoon, columns of spray rising ghostlike and dissolving in the moonlight while the gulls, absolutely indifferent and roosting, stirred never a feather, and the pirate crabs, white as ivory, stood like carved things or went on their business undisturbed.

Natives waking from their sleep, if they woke at all, would turn on the other side and close their eyes again. It was only the matura.

Whip rays twenty feet broad and four feet thick; a school of them at play, flinging themselves ten feet in the air and falling back in a litter of foam and with a concussion striking the lagoon floor and the reef; circling, pursuing one another in their monstrous play, they would keep the echoes rolling beneath the stars, till, as if at a given signal, silence would fall and the great fleet put out to sea again bound for where no man could know.

Awakened from sleep one night, Dick came out on the beach with Katafa. Used to the matura from childhood, she knew and told him, and standing there beside her, he had to believe that all this thunder and disturbance was caused by fish.

It was his first real initiation into the wonders of Karolin and the possibilities of the lagoon water. Then, as time went on, in the intervals of the tree felling, a business in which nearly all the women and boys took part, he would put out by himself to explore the depths and shallows of this great lake that was yet a sea in itself.

On the mind of Dick, almost unstained by the touch of civilization, yet vigorous and developed owing to his civilized ancestry, the world of Karolin exercised a fascination impossible to describe.

Sight, that bird of the soul, could roam here unchecked through the vast distances of sky, or rest on a coral branch in the emerald shallows of sea, pursue the frigate mackerel in its rush or the frigate bird in its flight. Out on the lagoon he would crouch sometimes with the paddle across his knees, drifting, idle, without connected thought, environment pressing in upon him till his mind became part of the brilliancy of sea and sky, of the current drift and the wind that blew.

All to the west of a line drawn from mid reef to mid reef lay oyster beds, acres in extent and separated by great streaks of hard sand where the fish cast black shadows as they swam, and the crabs scuttered away from the drifting shadow of the canoe. Near the northern beach, in ten-fathomed water, lay the Spanish ship of long ago, coral crusted, with the sea fans waving in the green and the mullet flitting in the shadow of her stern, a thing almost formless, yet with a trace of man's handiwork despite all the work of the coral builders, and still as death in a world where everything was adrift and moving, from the fish sharks that lurked in her shadows to the fucus blown as if by some submarine wind. But the strangest thing in this world of water was the circular current which the outflowing and incoming tides established in its center, a lazy drift of not more than two knots which was yet sufficient to trap any floating thing and keep it prisoner till a storm broke the spell.

One day Dick ventured so far out that he lost sight of land. Sure of his sense of direction this did not trouble him. He kept on, allured by clumps and masses of fucus torn loose by the last storm and drifting with the current, fucus alive with sea creatures, tiny crabs, ribbon fish and starry sea growths brilliant with color.

Then he put back. But an hour's paddling did not raise the reef, the current was just sufficient to turn the nose of the canoe and he was moving in that fatal circle in which all blind things and things without sense of direction move.

It was noon and the position of the sun gave him no help; sunset or starlight would have put him all right but he had not to wait for these. Then away off beyond a great patch of floating kelp and on his port bow he suddenly saw a dark spot in the sea dazzle. It was a canoe.

Le Moan, as fearless as himself and with a far greater knowledge of these waters, had been fishing along the bank that ran like a spar from the southern beach straight out, shoaling the lagoon water to four fathoms and at some places three. The Karaka Bank, it was called, and in great storms the lagoon waves broke on it and it showed like a pillow of snow. In ordinary weather nothing marked it but a slight change of color in the water, indicating want of depth.

Away beyond the spur of the Karaka Bank, Le Moan saw a canoe adrift and put toward it, guessing from its position and the fact that the paddle was not at work that it was in the grip of the central current.

Then as she drew near she saw that the canoeman was Taori. She hailed him and he told her that he had lost direction. Then, telling him to follow, she put her canoe about and struck the water with the paddle. Though from the elevation of a canoe the horizon showed nothing of the girding reef, her instinct for direction told her exactly how they lay with regard to all the reef points. The marvelous compass in her brain that never failed and could have steered a ship on the high seas as well as a canoe in Karolin lagoon told her that the village on the north beach lay over there, and over there her home on the south beach, that the matamata trees lay in such a position and the great palm clump just there.

But as she steered she made not for the north beach where Dick had launched forth and where he lived, but for the south beach where her own home was situated. She said no word but steered, and presently Dick, following her, saw across the narrowing lagoon the far-off jack-fruit trees showing across the water. He knew them and that this was the south beach, and, anxious to get back to Katafa, he would have turned and made for the northern village where trees were also vaguely visible, but he felt tired, the paddle was heavy in his hands, he wanted food and he was being led.

Just as the circular current of the lagoon had been sufficient to steer the canoe into a circular course, so was the leading of Le Moan sufficient to bring him to the south beach. A canoe was lying on the south beach and as Dick drew nearer he saw Palia and Tafata, the two old men, companions of Aioma and fellow craftsmen in the art of canoe building.

They were standing by the canoe in which a woman was seated and behind them stood the last habitable houses of the village, and behind the houses three coconut trees, hard against the dazzling pale blue of a sky that swept up to burning cobalt. Not a soul was to be seen on all that beach but the two old men.

Then came Le Moan's voice as she hailed them. "O he, Palia, where are the people, and what are you doing with that canoe?"

And Palia's voice answering.

"The word came after you put out this morning calling us to the northern beach for the building. We go. The rest have gone already in the big canoe that brought the word."

Dick at once knew. Aioma yesterday had declared the work far enough advanced to call in all hands, including Palia and Tafuta and the remaining people of the southern tribe.

"Then go," came Le Moan's voice as her canoe stranded on the shelving sand, "but leave me those things and a knife." She went to the canoe and took out some mating, a basket made of coconut sennit and a knife. As Dick brought his canoe ashore Palia and the others were putting off.

"You will follow us?" cried Palia as the paddles struck the water.

"Some time," replied Le Moan. She turned and began to build a fire to cook the fish she had caught and a breadfruit. Dick, seated on the sand with his knees up and his eyes following the far-off canoe, scarcely noticed her. She was one of the island girls, and though different from the others, of no account to him. An ordinary man would have been struck by her beauty, by her grace and the fact that she was different from the others, but Katafa had blinded him to other women, it was as though she had put a charm round him, a ring rendering him inviolate to all female approach.

Le Moan, building the fire and preparing the fish and putting the breadfruit to bake, never glanced at him. He was there. The being who had in some extraordinary way suddenly become part of her life was there. This was no ordinary passion of a girl for a man, but something far more recondite and rare, perhaps something half evolved from the yearning of the civilization hidden in her for the civilization in him, perhaps the recognition of race, and that he and she were apart from the island people, those animals man and woman shaped, but destitute of the something that moved like a flame in her mind, lighting nothing—till now.

He was hers just as the sun was hers.

In this first dawn of a love that was to consume her being, she would have died rather than tell him by glance or word the something that filled her mind.

The smoke of the little cooking fire went up like the smoke of an altar.

Who knows but perhaps woman cooking for man was the first priest, the camp fire the first altar, man the first god, his food the first burnt offering?

An hour later Dick, fed and rested, was pushing his canoe into the water, helped by his worshiper.

Then she got into her own canoe and accompanied him till the northern beach showed clear before them, the village, and to right of the village the great clump of matamatas, less by three than on the day she had sighted them last.

Here they parted company with the wave of a paddle, Le Moan returning to the desolation of the southern beach, Dick not knowing and not caring whither she went.

CHAPTER V.

CIVILIZATION PEEPS IN.

WITHOUT looking back, she turned the nose of her canoe straight for the southern beach. To left of her as she paddled lay the sea gate where the tide was flooding round the coral and the breeze blowing the gulls like snowflakes against the blue; to right the limitless expanse of the lagoon; ahead the desolate beach, the ruined village and the wild tangle of pandanus trees, their limbs wide spreading as the limbs of an elm, their fronds tossing like ill-kempt hair.

She hauled the light canoe above tide mark, then, turning to the right along the sands, she passed the trees and climbed the coral, standing for a moment facing the south and the empty sea. Then, turning, she gazed across the lagoon to where the far-away northern beach showed its trees above the water dazzle.

It was near full flood and the lagoon was brimming, the outer sea coming in great sheets of smoky blue, whirls of amethyst and streaks of cobalt between the piers of the break. Le Moan could hear the suck of the water through the gates as distinct from the sound of the breakers on the coral, beyond the sound of the breakers the voices of the gulls, beyond the gulls the silence reaching to the white trade clouds on the rim of the purple sea.

She was alone, but for the matter of that she had always been alone. Aioma and the two old men and the women and children who formed the last remnant of the southern tribe had never been her companion; she had fished with them and helped in the cooking and mat making, talked with them, lived with them, yet in a way, dwelt apart.

It was the race difference, perhaps, or some bent of soul owing to the fusion of races in her that made her a being quite alone, relying on no one but herself, a creature apart, almost a spirit. She had the power to lose herself utterly when gazing down into clear water, as on the day when Dick first saw her gazing into the pond by the trees. Great distances held her in the same way should she give herself over to them, and that strange flair for direction which she shared with the gulls was less perhaps instinctive than psychic, for the mind of Le Moan, eternally in touch with the wind, the sea, the sun and the stars was clairvoyant to the coming of storm and the sea changes that brought the great tiger sharks into the lagoon, altered the course of the mullet or drove the palu far from the fishing banks to northward of the reef.

Having stood for a while gazing to the north, she came back toward the deserted houses and began to prepare herself some food. After that there were lines to be mended and oap to be cleared from the paraka patch, and then came sunset and then the stars, and sleep deeper than the great depths beyond the palu bank.

Had Le Moan looked back across her past she would have seen a succession of days colored like the day just dead, brilliancy stretching away into years and opalled by rainy seasons and storms, nights when dreams were unhaunted by human form till to-night when, toward dawn, a ghostly canoeman showed in the mirror of sleep paddling toward her across a shimmering lagoon.

Then as the dream broke up and the vision vanished, Le Moan awoke beneath the last of the stars, awoke suddenly with fear clutching at her heart and with eyes wide but still half blinded with sleep.

She sat up. The dawn was breaking and the fishing gulls were putting out to sea. She could hear their voices through the sound of the breakers on the reef. Nothing more, yet she listened, listened with her eyes fixed on the great fan of light showing in the eastern sky against which the gulls showed like withered leaves tossed on the wind.

Nothing. The sea breeze stirred the leaves of the breadfruit and the branches of the pandanus palms and then fell flat, died out and changed to the first stirring of a land breeze; the highest flying gulls took color and the ghostly lagoon took form.

The girl, rising to her feet, swept the lagoon water with her eyes. Nothing. Then, turning, she passed between the trees to the coral of the outer beach and there, out on the ghostly sea and touched by the light of dawn, she saw a ship.

Years after the destruction of the Spanish ship, which had happened before her birth, a whaleman had put into the lagoon, cut wood, taken on water, been attacked by Uta Matu, the chief of Karolin, and escaped to the outer sea by a miracle.

Uta would have sent her to the bottom of the lagoon after the Spaniard, for in the depth of his ignorant but instinctive heart lay the knowledge that the black man's burden is the white man and that civilization to the savage means death.

Le Moan could still see as in a glass darkly the fight and the escape of the whaleman, and here again was a ship, different in shape from the one of long ago, but arousing in her mind, from association, an instinct of antagonism and dread.

The ship, which had been standing off and on all night, was a schooner, and now as the great sun heaved himself higher and golden ripples broke the sea line, Le Moan watched her take fire, sail after sail catching the light till on the new-born blue of the sea a golden ship lay heaving to the swell, flown round by golden gulls whose voices came chanting against the breeze like the voices of ghostly sailormen hauling in chorus.

Then as she altered her helm and the wind shivered out of her canvas a boat was dropped. It ran up a sail and Le Moan, her eyes shaded against the risen sun, saw the boat heading for the break. She ran back among the trees and stood for a moment, her hand pressed against her forehead, her mind in confusion, with one idea only fixed and steadfast. Taori!

Here was danger. Recollection backed instinct—the powerful instinct of a mind that could tell the north from the south without star or compass, the coming changes of weather, the movement of the fish shoals. The instinct that had awakened her with fear clutching at her heart.

Here was danger to Taori, and now as she stood, her hand clasped on her forehead, came the recollection, not only of Uta Matu's fight against the whaleman, but of Taori's words to Aioma about the bad men on Marua and the necessity of building the war canoes, and of how the young men of Karolin would soon be ripe for war.

But the canoes were not built and the warriors were not ready, and here, suddenly from out of nowhere, had come this great canoe with sails spreading to the sky. Uta Matu and his warriors and fleet were vanished and Taori was unprepared. Then came the thought that the boat making for the break was like the pilot fish that scouts ahead of the tiger shark—it would come into the lagoon and if it found food worth devouring the tiger shark would follow.

The village on the northern beach was invisible from the break, because of the trees and the crafty way Uta Matu had set it among the trees. She remembered that.

Then her heart suddenly took flame. She would save Taori.

She left the trees, and taking the sand of the inner beach she began running toward the break. She would attract the boat to her.

You have seen a bird attracting a man away from its nest, heedless of its own fate, thinking only of the thing it loved; just so Le Moan, facing the unknown which was more terrible than the terrible, sought now to save the being she loved with the love that casts out fear.

She had not run a hundred yards when the boat entered the lagoon, heeling to the breeze and carried by the first of the flood. She flung up her arms to it, then she stood watching as it changed its course, making straight toward her.

It was an ordinary ship's quarter boat, painted white, fitted with a mast and lug sail, and Le Moan as she stood watching paralyzed and waiting for her fate saw that she held four men—three Kanakas whose naked shoulders showed above the gunnel, and a huge man, black bearded and wearing a broad-brimmed white straw hat beneath which his face showed dark and terrible as the face of the King of Terrors.

He wore a shirt open at the throat and his shirt sleeves were rolled up, showing arms white yet covered with black hair. As the boat grounded and the Kanakas sprang out Le Moan scarcely saw them. Her eyes were fixed on the great man now standing on the beach, Colin Peterson, no less, one of the last of the sandalwood traders, master and part owner of the *Kermadec.* "Black Peterson," terrible to look at, swift to strike when roused, yet a man with kindness in his heart and straightness in his soul.

Poor Le Moan! Had she only known!

Peterson, sweeping his eyes over the empty and ruined houses and the desolate beach, fixed them on the girl, spoke to her in a tongue she did not understand and then called out:

"Sru!"

A Kanaka stepped forward. He was a Paumotuan, a yellow man, and half Melanesian, fierce of face, frizzy headed and wearing a necklace of little shells. After a word with Peterson, he turned to Le Moan and spoke to her and she understood. The language of Karolin was the language of the Paumotus; those far-off islands in the distant days had raided and fought with Karolin, in days still farther removed the first inhabitants of Karolin had drifted from the Paumotus, but neither Le Moan nor Sru knew aught of this nor of the common ancestry which gave them power of speech.

"I am here alone," said Le Moan, answering Sru. "My people are gone—a storm took them all. There is no one here." As she spoke her eyes left Sru and wandered northward to the far trace of the northern beach. The dread at her heart was lest Taori might, by some ill chance, put out fishing, show himself and be lost. But nothing showed, nothing but the far-distant trees above the sun blaze on the water.

She knew that the schooner was too far off and too much sheltered by the southern reef for the people on the north beach to see her, that Taori would be busy with the canoe building, yet the dread at her heart drove her to repeat the words automatically like a parrot. "There is no one here but me—my people are gone—a storm took them—I am here alone." As she spoke she watched Peterson with side glances. She had never seen a bearded man before, and this man with the black curling hair reaching almost to his eyes seemed a monster.

While she was speaking the other Kanakas, taking two large water breakers from the boat, began to fill them at the well, the well into which she had been looking on the day on which she had first seen Taori.

Colin Peterson stood looking at them. He had half turned from Le Moan and seemed to have forgotten her existence. Then, shading his eyes, he looked across and about the lagoon, but he was thinking neither of the Kanakas nor the lagoon. He was cursing Le Moan.

He had no use for this girl. He had come ashore for water at this uncharted island thinking maybe to find natives, never dreaming that he would be faced by a problem like this. It was impossible to leave the forlorn creature to her fate, yet what was he to do with her on board of the *Kermadec?* Had it been a man or a boy the matter would have been simple enough, but a girl? If he took her off he would have to find her a home somewhere among the Kanakas on one of the northern islands. He was bound for Amao but he reckoned that place was no use—the Kanakas were a bad lot.

As he stood like this thinking and staring about, Le Moan still watched him, this terrific man who seemed searching with his eyes for Taori.

Would he believe her story—would he kill her? Old tales of the terrible papalagi chased through her mind like bats in the dusk that had fallen upon her powers of thought—she did not know. She only knew that she did not care whether he killed her or not as long as he believed her story and departed without hurting Taori.

Then, suddenly, the last breaker of water in the boat, Peterson turned on Sru and shouted to him to fetch her on board. Perplexity in Peterson generally expressed itself in blasphemy, and when "Big Feller Mass'r" Peterson began to talk like that Sru never waited for the toe of the boot that was sure to follow.

He seized Le Moan by the arm and pushed her to the boat. For a moment she resisted, then she gave up, tumbled in and squatting forward of the mast saw as one sees in a dream the straining shoulders and tense arms of the Kanakas as bending and clutching the port and starboard gunnels they ran the boat out; she saw them tumble on board, felt the grating of the sand and then the balloonlike lift of the waterborne keel; she saw the sail above her take the wind and bulge hard against the blue of the sky; she saw the flying gulls and the wheeling lagoon and the trees of the southern beach vanishing to starboard as the boat headed for the break, but always and above everything she saw the massive head of Peterson as he sat in the stern sheets with the tiller in the crook of his elbow and his eyes fixed toward her and beyond.

Ai, the sea! What tragedies has it not been partner in; the sea of storms, the blue laughing sea, the sea that now, lovely in the light of morning, was flooding gently with the first of the flood through the gates of Karolin, lifting the boat to the outer swell as it passed the coral piers where the gulls cried above the foam of the breakers and the breakers answered to the crying gulls.

If Peterson had killed Le Moan on the beach she would have met her death without flinching. Seated now watching Karolin drop astern, her eyes never wavered nor softened. Even her fear of Peterson had vanished. It was as though she had died on passing the gates of the great atoll and entered a land where personality was not, only perception. A land of pictures that had no relationship to herself or anything she had ever known. She saw, as they came alongside, the white-painted side of the *Kermadec* with the ladder cast down, the rail, and above the rail the great white sail spaces all a-shiver in the wind. The faces of men looking down at the boat, the face of Rantan the mate, and Carlin a beach comber picked up at Soma and working his passage north.

Then she was on the deck which seemed to her broad and white as a beach, and the extraordinary newness of this strange place took on a cutting edge which pierced the deadness that had fallen upon her, this place so vast to her mind that it seemed land of a sort. A moment before, in the boat, the sea had been around her, but here the sea was nothing, this place was everything. Taori, Karolin, the reef, the ocean itself, all for a moment vanished, consumed by the *Kermadec* as by a flame.

And not a soul took notice of her after the first few words of Peterson to the mate. They were busy getting in the boat, and now as the rumbling and thrashing of the canvas above died out and the sails filled hard against the blue came the voices of gulls, gulls from the reef and deep-sea gulls flitting in the wake of the *Kermadec* that was now under way.

Le Moan, feeling herself unnoticed, and moving cautiously, came to the weather rail. She saw the reef and the distant trees of Karolin and the following gulls now flying north and south as if giving up the chase. Then the reef line passed from sight beneath the sea dazzle and the voice of the reef and the crying of the gulls died far off, while the treetops vainly fought with the ever-growing distance, now clinging to the sight, now washed utterly away.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MEN OF THE "KERMADEC."

NOW on board that ship there were three men set there by circumstance as pawns in a game of which Taori was king, Katafa queen, and Le Moan perhaps the hand of the player, and these men were Rantan the mate, Carlin the beach comber, and Sru, bos'n and chief of the Kanakas.

Rantan, a narrow slip of a man, hard-bitten and brown as a hickory nut, was a mystery. Perfect in the art of handling a schooner, he knew next to nothing of navigation. Peterson had picked him up as an extra hand, and the mate dying of fever, Rantan had taken his place, making up in general efficiency for his want of higher knowledge. He had spent all his life among the islands and the natives; he could talk to Sru in his own tongue like a brother born, and could pick up the dialect of any island in a week, but he had little to say in English. A silent man who never drank, never smoked and never cursed.

Peterson disliked him for no apparent reason whatsoever. He could have got rid of him, but he didn't. Sobriety is a jewel in the Pacific, especially when it is worn by schooner mates.

Carlin had come on board the *Kermadec* just before she sailed from Soma. He was a big red-headed man, useless for anything but beach combing, he wanted to get up to "them northern islands" and Peterson out of the heart kindness that had made him take Le Moan on board, took him. He made him work, yet gave him a bunk aft, thus constituting him in a way one of the ship's officers.

Carlin was one of the unfortunates born with a thirst, but in his case it only broke out on land; on board ship he had no wish for liquor, but the beach felled him as if with a poleax.

Sru, the last of the three men, stood over six feet, stark naked except for a gee string, he was a man from the beginning of the world. He could cast a spear and find his mark at fifty yards, his nose was flattened, his cheek bones broad and his face, especially when his eyes were accommodated for distance, wore an expression of ferocity that yet had nothing evil in it. Le Moan had no fear of him. Indeed at the end of her second day on the schooner she had no fear of any one on board. Instinct told her that whatever these men might have done to Taori and the tribe, they would not hurt her. Fortunately she never recognized how utterly useless had been her sacrifice, never recognized the fact that Colin Peterson, so far from hurting Dick, would have been his friend—otherwise she might have cast herself overboard, for her sorrow was heavy on her and wanted no extra weight.

Peterson had given her over to Sru to look after and Sru had made her a shakedown in the long boat. She fed with the Kanaka crew, who took their meals on deck, and became part of their family and tribe, but she would not go into the fo'c's'le, nor would she go into the cabin. Those holes in the deck leading down below were, for her, mysterious and terrific; she had peeped down the saloon hatchway and seen the steps going down as into a well and the polish of the handrail and a light below shining on a mat. It was light reflected from the saloon, yet none the less mysterious for that, and the whole thing struck her with the enchantment that quite commonplace things sometimes possess for little children, but it was an enchantment tinged with the shadow of dread.

She had no fear of the men on board, yet she had a dread of the saloon companionway, of the main boom, till it explained itself to her, of the windlass with its iron teeth. The men, in spite of their clothes and strange ways shook down as human beings, but the wheel that steered the schooner and the binnacle into which the steersman gazed as he stood moving the spokes, forever moving the spokes of the mysterious wheel, those things were mysterious and their mystery was tinged with the shadow of dread. They were part of the unknown that surrounded her. To the savage the thing unknown is a thing to be feared.

One day when Sru was at the wheel and the deck was empty, she ventured to peep into the binnacle and saw beneath the glittering glass like a starfish in a rock pool the compass card trembling like a living thing. Had not the deck been empty so that she dared to speak to Sru on this matter and had not he been in a mood to answer her, the whole life of Le Moan would have been altered and never again might she have seen Taori.

"What is it?" asked she, glancing across her shoulder at the steersman, "and why do you look at it so?"

"This," said Sru, indicating the wheel for which he had no word in the native, "moves the steering paddle, and into that I look to find my way."

Now when Karolin had sunk beneath the sea rim the conviction had come to Le Moan that never would she see her home again. Her instinct told her where it lay, and given a canoe she could have found it even at this great distance, but her knowledge of where it lay was no comfort to her. She felt that the great hand that had seized her would never let her go and that a door had closed forever between this new world and the old where Taori dwelt safe owing to the closing of the door.

She glanced again at the binnacle and then speaking like a person in reverie she said: "Without that I could find my way though the sea were dark and no stars shone, as I have found my way often in the fishing canoes when the land was so far it could not be seen."

Sru knew what she meant. At Soma in the Paumotus, from where he had come, the directional instinct, shared more or less by all savages, was especially marked in some of the children, and the deep-sea canoes in those waters where the currents run in an unaccountable manner and where the trade winds are not, depended on the instinct of the steersman.

He bade her close her eyes and turn and turn. "Where now lies the land we have left?" asked Sru. Without opening her eyes and not knowing east from west or north from south, she pointed aft almost dead south.

Sru laughed. She was right. The mysterious compass in her brain that worked without error or deviation would have pointed to Karolin, though a thousand miles away; then as he spun the wheel having let the *Kermadec* a point or two off her course, Le Moan went forward and he forgot her, but he did not forget what she had told him. It remained in his tenacious mind like a pebble in molasses, hidden, but there, till three days later when toward evening while the Kanakas were eating supper on deck Sru was brought face to face and for the first time in his life with a great idea, an idea that included tobacco not by the stick, but in cases, rum in casks, barlow knives, chalk pipes and patent-leather boots, also canned salmon and Seidlitz powders.

Sru, an old pearler, had been in the last of the pearling at Soma before the banks gave out. He knew the value of pearls.

CHAPTER VII.

"THE PEARL."

THEY were seated on the main deck near the galley, their coffee mugs beside them and their plates on their knees, and the *Kermadec,* on a steady seven-knot clip, was heeled slightly to starboard, almost rigid as a board.

For days she had run so, with the port rail raised against the white fringe of trade clouds on the far horizon, a steady list from a steady breeze warm and winged with the silver fins of flying fish, a tepid tea-scented wind and—as the north can never know—less a wind than a revelation such as men try to express when they speak of the breath of the tropics.

The cook had served out the food, and as they ate he talked; he was a big man with the voice of a child and he was talking of his native village apropos of nothing and to nobody in particular, which is a way Kanakas have.

Of the world around them, save for Soma and the southern islands and the island in the north which a few of them knew, Sru, Peroii and the rest of them were as ignorant as Le Moan.

As they talked, the rosy light of sunset falling on them and reflected by the fore canvas, Sru, who was seated by Peroii, saw the wind lift Le Moan's dark hair, exposing the pearl charm she wore behind the left ear, the double pearl, lustrous and beautiful, tied in the hair so cunningly and betrayed by the wind.

La Jonabon had given it to her daughter as a protection against drowning and mischance. More than that, it was a love amulet, making sure for the girl a happy married life with a man who would not misuse her. Love amulet or not, La Jonabon had given to her daughter a talisman of extraordinary power. Exposed by the wind for a moment it had spoken to Sru. It said clearly as tongue could speak, "Karolin is a pearl lagoon." Then as Le Moan raised her hand and tucked the hair back behind her ear, Sru, who had paused in his eating, went on with his food, his dark eyes fixed beyond Peroii, beyond the vision of deck and mast and standing rigging, beyond all things visible, upon wealth. Cases of tobacco and rum in many bottles, clay pipes, a gun, and boxes of Swedish matches to strike at pleasure. Karolin lagoon held all these things; the pearl behind Le Moan's ear told him that for a certainty, but Karolin was far astern and he would never see it again, that also was a certainty and before it the heart of Sru became filled with bitterness. A few minutes ago he had been happy and free of care, now his soul was dark as the sea becomes dark with a squall suddenly rising and blowing up out of a clear sky. He had discovered a pearl lagoon—too late. Leaving the others to finish their meal he rose up and dropped below into the fo'c's'le. There, curled up in his bunk in the gloom, he lay to consider this matter.

It was useless to speak of it to Peterson. He would never put the ship back, and even if he did, Sru would profit little by the matter. He would maybe get a few sticks of tobacco for telling of it, or a knife. Peterson, though kind-hearted enough to rescue Le Moan, was a hard man where bargaining with natives was concerned. Sru had an intimate knowledge of white men, or at least white traders and their ways, and Peterson was a white man to the core.

Then as he lay facing this fact, the idea of Rantan came before him.

Rantan who could talk to him in his own tongue like a brother, who was half a native as far as language and ideas went, and yet was a white man.

Though Rantan had no power to put the ship back, it came into Sru's mind that somehow or in some way this man, clever as all the papalagi were, might be able to do something in the matter. Eased by this idea he turned out of the bunk and came on deck.

The sunset was just vanishing from the sky where in the pansy dusk the constellations were sketching themselves above the vague violet of the sea. Then, suddenly, like the closing of a door, the west went dark and the stars blazed out and bloomed in full sight. The wind, moist and warm, blew steadily, and Sru, standing in the draft from the headsails, looked about him, forward at the bowsprit rising and falling against the sea stars and aft where the white decks showed, the man at the wheel clearly visible and some one leaning on the weather rail—Carlin, to judge by his bulk.

Rantan was nowhere to be seen.

Close to Sru and hunched against some rope coiled by the windlass he saw a figure. It was Le Moan. She was seated with her knees up and her hands round her knees, and she seemed asleep; but she was not asleep, for as Sru's eyes fell on her, her face lifted and he saw the glint of her eyes in the starlight. Those mournful eyes that ever since her departure from Karolin seemed like the eyes of a person in trance, of a dreamer who was yet conscious of some great and real disaster.

Sru instantly forgot Rantan. It seemed that somewhere deep in his shadowy mind something had linked Le Moan with the pearl lagoon and any chance of success in finding it again, raiding it, and turning milk-white chatoyant pearls into sticks of tobacco, bottles of rum, clay pipes and beads to buy love with.

She had given him the indication of what was there, but it seemed to him that she could do more than that.

He crumpled up and sat down beside her on the deck and spoke soft words, asking her what ailed her that she looked so sorrowful. "For," said Sru, "the storm that took your people has without doubt taken many more in the island and will not give them back, not though men weep forever; it is so, and it is so, and ever will be so, and to eat the heart out for that which has been, is to feed foolishly, for," said Sru, "the coral waxes, the palm grows but man departs." He was repeating the old island proverb and for a moment he had forgotten Karolin, pearls, gin bottles and the glory of Seidlitz powders in effervescence like the foam on the reef; he had forgotten all little things and his words and voice broke up the depths of Le Moan and the cause of her grief came forth. Otherwise and soon she might have died of it. Conscious that Karolin was so far in the past that it was safe to speak, she told Sru that no storm had overtaken her people, that she had lied to Peterson so that he might not discover and perhaps kill the being she loved, and there, sitting in the shadowing starlight, she did that which she had never done before even for her own inspection—opened her heart, told, as a sleeper might tell in sleep, of her love for Taori and of his beauty and strength and swiftness and of everything except that which she did not know—the fact that Taori had a lover already, Katafa.

She spoke and Sru listened, absorbing her words and her story as a Kanaka will absorb any sort of tale he can understand. Then this amazing savage who had spoken so poetically about the waxing of the coral and the passing of man, this sympathizer who had spoken so softly in addressing grief, leaning on his elbow began to shake with laughter.

He knew that Big Feller Mass'r Peterson would not have hurt a hair of Taori's head, that he did not want to take Le Moan off the beach and had only done so because he imagined her unable to fend for herself. He saw that Le Moan, trying to protect her lover against imaginary perils, had allowed herself to be sacrificed and snatched away from everything she loved and cared for, that she had prepared for herself the trap into which she had fallen and all this to the mind of Sru seemed a huge joke, almost as good as the joke of the drunken man he had once seen, who, trying to cut wood with his foot on a log had cut off his foot with the ax he was wielding.

Sru giggled like a girl being tickled, then he burst out in snorts like a buffalo in a temper, choked as though he had swallowed a fish bone and then began to explain.

Began to explain and failed to hit the mark simply because Le Moan could not understand why Big Feller Mass'r Peterson had taken her away from Karolin. He did not want to take her away yet he had taken her away. Le Moan could not understand that in the least.

Le Moan could not understand pity. She had never come across it in others and she had never felt it for herself. Had she been able to pity herself, she would have flung herself on the deck weeping and wailing when the *Kermadec* turned her stern to the south and dropped Karolin beyond the horizon. She had sacrificed herself for the sake of the being who dominated her existence, she had dared the most terrible of all things, the unknown, yet she could not in the least understand why Peterson should do what he did not want to do for the sake of a being, a stranger whom he had never seen before.

To tell the truth Sru did not quite comprehend it either. He knew it was so and he left it at that. It was one of the strange and unaccountable things that white men were always doing. What intrigued him was the fact that Le Moan had fooled herself in fancying Peterson a dangerous man capable of injuring her lover and that Peterson had fooled himself in believing her story.

So he talked till Le Moan at last understood the fact that, whatever Peterson's object in taking her away may have been, he would not have injured Taori, that if she had said nothing he would have gone off after having filled the water breakers at the well, and as he talked and as she listened dumb before the great truth that she had sacrificed everything for nothing, slowly up from the subconscious mind of Sru and urged by his talk, came an idea.

"You will go back," said Sru. "Listen—it is I, Sru, who am talking. We will go back, you and I, and what tells me is that which lies behind thy left ear."

Le Moan put her hand up to the amulet hidden beneath her hair.

"We will go back," went on Sru, "you and I and another man, and perhaps more, all good men who will not hurt Taori. But Pete'son, no—no," he murmured as if communing with some dark spirit. "He would swallow all. He alone knows the way across the sea, so that setting the steering paddle this way or that he can go straight as the frigate bird to Soma or to Nalauka, to what island or land he chooses, he alone of the men on board this ship. But thou art wise as he. Wise as the frigate bird that leaves the land far from sight, yet can return. You will guide us to Karolin. Can your eyes still see that beach and where it lies?"

Le Moan threw out her arms.

"Though I were blind as the sandworm, I could find it," said Le Moan, "through night and storm—but when?"

"No man can hurry the rising of the day," said Sru, "but soon it will come and soon your eyes shall fall upon Taori—that which lies behind your left ear has told me, and it has told me more. Answer so that I may know if it speaks the truth. It has told me that thick in that lagoon lie the shells of the oyster from whence it came. Is that true talk?"

"Thick and far they lie," said Le Moan, "from the Karaka far as one can paddle from the coming in to the middle of the tide."

"So," said Sru, "it spoke the truth. When we make our return you will go to meet Taori and we to find the oyster for the sake of the stones they hold, brethren of that which lies—there."

He touched her hair behind her left ear and rose, gliding off aft while Le Moan, whose life had suddenly come back to her, sat gazing through night and beyond the stars at a sunlit beach where, spear in hand and lovely as the morning, stood Taori.

Taori who at that moment tired out with the labor of canoe building was lying asleep with his arm across the warm body of Katafa.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE MIND OF SRU."

NOW the mind of Sru had sat down to talk with Le Moan having in it no plan—nothing but a desire for pearls and what pearls would bring, and the knowledge sure and instinctive that Karolin was a pearl lagoon. It had risen up armed with a plan.

This plan had come to him from his close contact and talk with Le Moan. Brooding alone with nothing for his mind to cling to, it is doubtful if Sru could have evolved a plan; the presence of the girl, her connection with Karolin, her story, her wish to get back, the fact that she was a pathfinder and the fact that Peterson, even if he took the *Kermadec* back, would take all the profit of the business for himself, all these thoughts and considerations came together in Sru's mind and held together like a cluster of bees, owing to the presence of the girl who was the core and center of everything. He would speak of the matter to Rantan. Sru understood that Karolin was not on the charts, those mysterious pieces of paper that enabled Peterson to find his way about; he understood that Rantan had little knowledge of navigation; he only knew that were they to steer south for as many days as they had steered north and then hand the steering over to Le Moan, she would bring them to the place desired.

Give her the wheel right away and she would steer them back, but she could not stand at the wheel for days and days; no, it would be enough to steer south by the compass and then when close on that latitude hand the wheel to her. The instinct that led the birds over unmarked sea spaces and the palu from hundreds of miles away to the selfsame breeding grounds, that would be sufficient.

Going aft he hung about for a while close to the fellow at the wheel. There was no sign of Rantan and, Peterson coming on deck, Sru went forward again and dropped below to the fo'c's'le. It was in the morning watch that he found his opportunity. Only Rantan and the steersman were aft and Sru coming along, stood with the mate by the rail.

The dawn was full on the sea.

They spoke for a minute on the prospect of the wind holding, and then Sru, with a glance at the steersman to make sure he was out of hearing, came to his subject.

"That land we have left," said Sru, "is Karolin. The girl has told me the name, but much more as well. That lagoon is a pearl lagoon. This is a private matter between us. I tell you because I could not tell any one else and because I think we may profit by it."

"A pearl lagoon," said Rantan. "Is she speaking the truth?"

"The truth. She wears behind her ear two pearls in one—so," said Sru, joining his closed fists in the dawn light. "They are tied in her hair, and the wind lifting her hair, I saw them. Then I spoke and she told me. Now, listen, Ra'tan, we know of this matter, you and I; we two alone will get those pearls—Pete'son, no. He would swallow them all and give us the shells to eat. But how we are to go has not been shown to me. It is for you to see to that matter."

All this he said in the native and Rantan, listening, tapped out the ashes from his pipe against his heel, and then, pipe in hand, leaned against the rail, his eyes fixed on the deck.

In the increasing light he could see the deck planking clearly even to the dowels. Plunged fathoms deep in thought he said nothing for a while. Then, raising his eyes, he spoke.

"What you say is true, but Pete'son is the wisest of us. How can we find that island again without him? As you know, my life has been spent mostly among the islands, shore along and between island and island as they lie in the Paumotus ten to a space as broad as your palm. I can handle this ship or any ship like this or any canoe, as you know, but to look at the sun at noon as Pete'son looks, and to say 'I am here, or here'—that art has not been given me. I have not lived my life on the deep sea, but only in shallow waters. Then again Pete'son is not the full owner of this ship; there is another man who owns a part and without talking to him he cannot break a voyage, he cannot say I will go here or here without the other man saying yes."

"That is the more reason," said Sru, "that we must go without him."

"And without him we cannot find our way," replied Rantan.

Then Sru told of Le Moan's power of direction finding. Rantan understood at once. He had seen the thing often among the natives of Soma and other islands and the fact came suddenly on his mind like the blow of a hammer riveting things together.

But he said nothing to show exactly what was in his mind. He heard Sru out, and told him to go forward and not speak of the matter to any one. "For," said Rantan, "there may be something in what you say. I do not know yet, but I will think the matter over."

Left alone he stood, his eyes on the sun blaze creeping upon the eastern horizon. He was a quick thinker. The thing was possible, and if Karolin lagoon was a true pearl lagoon the thing was a fortune.

By taking the *Kermadec* there with the Kanaka crew for divers, eight months' or a year's work would give the profit of twenty voyages. Well he knew that if Colin Peterson were the chief of that expedition there would be little profit for any one but Peterson and his partner. Peterson would have to be eliminated if there was any work to be done in this business.

Sru had not said a word about Taori or Le Moan's untruth as to Karolin being uninhabited.

It would have tangled the story for one thing, and for another might not Ra'tan say to himself: "If this girl has lied on one matter, may she not be lying about the pearls?" Sru knew instinctively that she spoke the truth, and he left it at that, and Rantan, watching now the glory of the rising sun, stood, his plan crystallizing into full shape, his eyes gazing not on the sunlit sea but on Karolin, a desolate atoll, uninhabited, with no eyes to watch what might be done there but the eyes of the sea gulls.

CHAPTER IX.

CARLIN.

LE MOAN had never known pity; she had lived among the pitiless, and if any seed of the divine flower lay in her heart it had never grown nor come to blossom. She had seen her tribe raided and destroyed and the remnants chased to sea by the northern tribe under Uta Matu; she had seen battle and murder and sudden death, storm and destruction; she had seen swordfish at war and the madness and blood lust of fish, bow-head whales destroyed by orcas, and tiger sharks taking men—all these things had left her unmoved by pity as they would have left Rantan. Yet between these two pitiless ones lay a distance greater than that between star and star.

Le Moan had sacrificed herself for the sake of Taori; had faced what was more terrible than death—the unknown—for the sake of the man who had inspired her with passion; and had found what was more terrible than death—separation.

To return and find Taori she would, if necessary, have destroyed the *Kermadec* and her crew without a second thought, just as to save him she would have destroyed herself. Rantan could not have understood this, even if it had been carefully explained to him with diagrams exhibiting the savage soul of Le Moan, all dark save where at a point it blazed into flame.

All that day, working out his black plan, he reviewed his instruments, Sru, Carlin, the crew, the *Kermadec,* and last and least the Kanaka girl who would act as a compass and a navigator. A creature of no account save for the instinct she shared with the fish and the birds—so he fancied.

The *Kermadec* had loaded some turtle shell at Soma and at Levua she was to pick up a cargo of sandalwood. San Francisco was her next port of call, but to Rantan's mind it did not seem probable that she would ever reach San Francisco. It all depended on Carlin. Rantan could not do the business alone even with the help of Sru; Carlin was a beach comber and to leave him with a full whisky bottle would have been fatal for the whisky bottle. But he was a white man! He would have been fired off any ship but the *Kermadec*. But he was a white man. Rantan felt the necessity of having a white man with him on the desperate venture which he had planned, and taking Carlin aside that night he began to sound him.

"We're due at Levua to-morrow," said Rantan. "Ever been to Levua?"

"Don't know it," replied the other. "Don't want to neither; by all accounts, listening to the Old Man, there's nothing there but one dam' sandalwood trader and the Kanakas he uses for cutting the wood. I want to beach at Tahiti, that's where I'm nosing for when I get to Frisco. There's boats in plenty running down from Frisco to Tahiti."

"Maybe," said Rantan, "but seems to me there's not much doing at Tahiti. Hasn't it ever hit you that there's money to be made in the islands and better work to be done than bumming about on the beach? I don't mean hard work, handling cargo or running a ship—I mean money to be picked up, easy money and plenty of it."

The big red man laughed and spat over the rail.

"Not much," said he, "not by the likes of me or you. Clam shells is all there's to be picked up by the likes of me and you when the other chaps have eaten the chowder."

"How'd you like ten thousand dollars in your fist?" asked Rantan, "twenty—thirty—there's no knowing what it might come to, and all for no work at all but just watching Kanakas diving for pearls."

Carlin glanced sidewise at his companion.

"What are you getting at?" asked he.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Rantan. "I know of a pearl island and it's not far from here. It's a sealed lagoon, never been worked, and there's enough there to make a dozen men rich. But to get there I'd want a ship, but I haven't got one nor the money to charter one; I'm like you, see?"

"What are you getting at?" asked Carlin again, a new tone in his voice.

"I'm just saying I haven't a ship," replied the other, "but I know where to get one if I could find a chap to help me in the taking of her."

Carlin leaned farther over the rail and spat again into the sea. With terrible instinct he had taken up the full meaning of the other.

"And how about the Kanakas?" asked he. "Kanakas are dam' fools, but get them into a court of law and they're bilge pumps for turning up the evidence. I've seen it," he finished, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "A sinking job it was, and the chap that did it got ten years, on Kanaka evidence."

Rantan laughed. "Leave the Kanakas to me," said he. "I'm putting it to you; if I've the sand to do the job, would you help?"

"I'm not saying I wouldn't," said Carlin. "But what about the navigating? You aren't much good on that job—or are you? I'm thinking maybe you've been holding it up your sleeve."

"I'm good enough to get there," replied Rantan. "Well, think it over. We've time on our hands and no need to hurry. But remember there's no knowing the money in the business, and if it comes to doing it, don't you worry about risks. I'm not a man to take more than ordinary risks and I'll fix everything."

Then he turned away and walked aft, leaving Carlin leaning on the rail.

Whatever Carlin's start in life may have been, he was now beach worn like one of the old cans you find tossing about on the reef—flung away by the Kanakas, label gone, and nothing to indicate its past contents. The best men in the world would wilt on the beach, and that's the truth; the beach, that is to say sun, and little to do; the sun kills or demoralizes more men than whisky. To be born to the sun, you must be born in the sun, like Katafa, like Dick, like Le Moan; you must never have worn clothes.

Sometimes a white man is sun proof inside and out, but rarely. Carlin was sun proof on the outside, his skin stood the pelting of the terrible invisible rays; he throve on it; but internally he had gone to pieces.

He had one ambition, whisky—or rum, or gin or even samshu, but whisky for choice.

There was whisky on the *Kermadec*, but not for Carlin. Peterson, as sober a man as Rantan, kept it, just as he kept the Viterli rifles in the arms rack, for use in an emergency. It was under lock and key, but Carlin had smelt it out.

Its presence on board was like the presence of an evil genius, invisible, but there and exercising its power; it kept reminding him of Rantan's words, at supper that night and when he turned in and even in his sleep its work went on, he saw in his dreams the *Kermadec* heading for the unknown pearl island toward the golden light of fortune and unlimited whisky; he was on her deck with Rantan in command and Peterson was not there.

The dream said nothing about Peterson, totally ignored him, and Peterson, on deck at that moment, had no idea that the beach comber was dreaming of the *Kermadec* off her course and without her skipper.

Next day, in the morning watch, Sru was at the wheel and Rantan, a pipe in his mouth, stood by the weather rail. The sun had just risen, shattering the night and spreading gold across the breezed-up blue of the swell.

The sunrise came to the *Kermadec* like the sudden clap of a hot hand. Sru felt it on his back and Rantan on his cheek. From away to windward came the cry of a gull; a gull passed overhead with domed wings, circled as if inspecting the schooner and drifted off on the wind. Almost at the same moment came the cry of the Kanaka lookout. "Land!"

Rantan walked forward. Right ahead, rosy above the brimming sea, lay the cloud scarf of Levua.

Still a great way off, facing the blazing east, the island, clear of any trace of morning bank, seemed to float between the blue of sea and sky, remote, more lovely than any dream.

When Rantan turned aft again he found Le Moan standing by Sru at the wheel. Sru was explaining to her how the wheel worked the "steering paddle" in the stern. The *Kermadec* was close hauled, every sail drawing. Sru was explaining this matter and showing how the least bit closer to the wind would set the sails shivering and take the way off the ship. Le Moan understood. Sea craft was born in her and used now to the vast sail spaces of the schooner, she felt no fear. The *Kermadec* was only a canoe, after all; of a larger build and different make.

He let her hold the spokes for a moment, governing the wheel with a guiding hand, then at the risk of the schooner being taken aback he stood aside and the girl had the helm.

The *Kermadec* for a moment showed no sign that the wheel had changed hands. Then, suddenly, a little warning flutter passed through the canvas from the luff of the mainsail, passed and ceased and the sail became hard again. Le Moan had understood, understood instinctively, that ceaseless pressure against the lee bow which tends to push a vessel's head up into the wind.

For a moment, Taori, Karolin, the very presence of Sru were forgotten, the words that Sru had spoken to her only a little while before: "You will soon see Taori, little one, but first you must learn to use the steering paddle." Everything was forgotten in the first new grip of the power that was in her to hold all those great sail spaces filling, to play such a great game with the wind and the sea.

Aioma had taught her to steer her fishing canoe, but so long ago that she could not remember the first time she had the paddle to herself. But this was different; different as the kiss of a lover from the kiss of a friend. This was something that reached her soul; this was different as the sight of Taori from the sight of other men—great, thrilling, lifting her above herself, creative.

Utterly ignorant of the mechanism that moved the rudder, as a man is ignorant of the mechanism that moves his arm, after the first few minutes of the great new experience she could not do wrong. She knew nothing of the compass; she only knew that she was to keep the ship close hauled as Sru had been keeping her, so close that a fraction nearer the wind would spill the sails. Sru watched her, and Rantan, forgetting his pipe, stood with his eyes fixed on her. Both men recognized that the ship was safe for the moment. One might have thought them admiring the picture that she made against the blue sky and the glory of morning, but the interest in their eyes was neither the interest of the roused æsthetic sense, nor of love, nor of seamanship.

As they stood, suddenly, and as though tragedy had staged the scene for some viewless audience, the head and shoulders of Peterson appeared at the saloon-hatch opening.

Rantan, his face mottled with white, stared at Peterson, Sru drawing the back of his hand across his nose as if wiping it, stood on one foot, then on the other, confused, looking like a dog that has been misbehaving itself. Le Moan saw nothing.

Without losing its alertness on the touch of the wheel her mind had gone off for a momentary flight. She saw herself steering the *Kermadec* toward Karolin; she saw in imagination the distant reef, the gulls and the thrilling blue of the great lagoon beyond the reef opening.

Peterson, without coming farther on deck, watched her for a moment without comprehending anything but the fact that the girl had been allowed to take the wheel. Then as Sru took the spokes from her and pushed her forward, the captain of the *Kermadec* turned on Rantan, but the abuse on his lips was half shriveled by the look on the face of the mate.

"Don't you never do a thing like that again," said Peterson. "Dam tomfoolery." He snorted and went forward, kicked a Kanaka out of his way and then stood, his eyes fixed on the distant vision of Levua, opal tinted in the blue, blue north.

CHAPTER X.

CARLIN DECIDES.

THEY came in on a dying wind, the outlying reefs creaming to the swell and the great high island opening its cañons and mountain glades as they drew toward it, pursued by the chanting gulls.

Le Moan—who had never seen a high island, or only the vision of Palm Tree uplifted by mirage—stood with her eyes fixed on the multitude of the trees. Palms, breadfruit, tree ferns, aoas, sandalwood groves—trees mounting toward the skies, reaching ever upward, changing in form and misted by the smoke of torrents.

Here there was no freedom. The great spaces of the sea had vanished. Levua like an ogre had seized her mind and made it a prisoner.

For the first time in her life something came to her heart, terrible as her grief for the loss of Taori, yet even more far searching and taking its bitterness from the remote past as well as the present. It was the homesickness of the atoll-bred islander encompassed by the new world of the high island; of the caged gull taken from the freedom of the wind and the sea.

At Karolin you could see the sun from his rising to his setting, and the stars from sea line to sea line; the reef rose nowhere to more than twice the height of a man; the sea was a glittering plain of freedom and a sound and a scent.

Worse even than the monstrous height of Levua, its strange cañons and gloomy woods, was the scent of the foliage, cossi and vanilla and sandalwood, unknown flowers, unknown plants, all mixed with the smell of earth and breathing from the glasshouse atmosphere of the groves.

An extraordinary thing was the way in which the forms and perfumes of Levua permeated the *Kermadec* itself, so that, turning her eyes away from the land, the deck of the schooner, the rails, masts and spars, all seemed hostile to her as the land itself. Sru alone gave her comfort as she watched him superintending the fellows busy with the anchor—Sru, who had promised that she would return.

The anchor fell in twelve-fathom water and as the rumble-tumble of the anchor chain came back in echoes from the moist-throated woods, a boat put out from the beach. It was Sanders the white trader, the man who lived here alone year in, year out, taking toll of the sandalwood trees, paying the natives for their labor in trade goods; cut off from the world, without books, without friends, and with no interest beyond the zone of sea encircling the island—except the interest of his steadily accumulating money in the hands of his agents, the Bank of California.

The face of the white man showed thin and expressionless as a wedge of ice as he came over the rail like a ghost and slipped down to the cabin with Peterson to talk business.

Rantan and Carlin leaned over the side and watched the Kanakas in the boat pulling forward to talk to the schooner crew congregated at the rail by the fo'c's'le head.

The beach lay only a cable length or two away, empty except for a couple of fishing canoes drawn up beyond tide mark. No house was to be seen, the village lying back among the trees, and no sound came from all that incredible wealth of verdure—nothing but the far voice of a torrent, raving yet slumberous and mixed with the hush of the surf on the reefs and beach.

"Notice that chap," said Carlin. "Didn't look to right or left of him, same's if he'd been doped. Reckon he's full of money too if he's the only trader here. Notice his white ducks and his dandy hat and the mug under it? I know the sort. Drink turns to vinegar in a chap like that, and that's the sort that makes money in the islands."

"Or the fellows that aren't afraid to put their hands on the stuff when they see it," replied Rantan. "Well, what about that pearl island I was speaking of?"

"And that hooker you were going to take to get there," cut in Carlin. "Put me on her deck and I'm with you."

"You're on it," replied Rantan.

Carlin laughed. He had known Rantan's meaning all along and this strange game of evasion between the two had nothing to do with the *Kermadec*, but with something neither dared to discuss, one with the other—Peterson, and what was to be done with Peterson.

"You're on it," continued Rantan, "and now what do you say?"

"I'm with you," replied Carlin, "but I don't see how you're to do it. I'll have no hand in doing it."

"Leave that to me," said the other. "You've only to help work the ship when I've taken her."

"You say Sanders is the only white man here," said Carlin.

"So Peterson tells me," replied Rantan.

"Well, one white man is enough to turn on us," said Carlin.

"He won't turn on us," replied Rantan grimly, and Carlin, glancing at him sidewise, wondered for a moment if he hadn't the devil in tow with Rantan. But Carlin was of the type that will take profit and not care so long as its own hands are clean. I wonder how many of us would eat meat if we had to do the killing ourselves, or make money from poisonous industries if we had ourselves to face the poison. What Rantan chose to do was nothing to Carlin so long as he himself had not to do it or to plan it, but he was cautious.

"How about that chap Sru?" he asked. "He's boss of the crew and the only thinking one of them. Suppose——"

"Nothing," replied the other. "He's with me."

Fell a silence filled with the voice of the far torrent and the murmur of the sea, a hush-a-by sound through which vaguely came the murmur of voices through the skylight of the saloon where Peterson and the trader were discussing prices and freights, each absorbed by the one sole idea—profit at the expense of the other.

CHAPTER XI.

"THE TRAGEDY."

THE Pacific has many industries but none more appealing to the imagination than the old sandalwood trade, a perfumed business that died when copra found its own, before the novelist and the soap boiler came to work the sea of romance, before the B. P. boats churned its swell or Honolulu learned to talk the language of San Francisco.

In those days Levua showed above the billowing green of the breadfruit, the seaward-nodding palms, and the tossing fronds of the dracænas, a belt, visible from the sea, where the sandalwood trees grew and flourished. Trees like the myrtle, many branched and not more than a foot thick in the trunk, with a white, deliciously perfumed wood deepening to yellow at the root.

Sanders, the trader of Levua who exported this timber, paid for it in trade goods, so many sticks of tobacco at five cents a stick, so many colored beads or pieces of hoop iron wherewith to make knives, for a tree. He paid this price to Tahuku, the chief of the tribe, and he paid nothing for the work of tree felling, barking and cutting the wood into billets. Tahuku arranged all that. He was the capitalist of Levua, though his only capital was his own ferocity and cunning, the trees rightfully belonging to all. The billets already cut and stored in godowns were rafted across the lagoon in fragrant heaps to the *Kermadec* and shot on board from hand to hand, piled on deck and then stowed in the hold, a slow business watched by Le Moan with uncomprehending eyes. She knew nothing of trade. She only knew what Sru had promised her, that soon, very soon, the ship would turn and go south to find Karolin once again. She believed him because he spoke the truth and she had an instinct for the truth keen as her instinct for direction, so she waited and watched while the cargo came leisurely and day by day and week by week, the cargo bound for nowhere, never to be sold, never to be turned into incense, beads, fancy boxes and cabinets; the cargo only submitted to by the powers that had taken command of the *Kermadec* and her captain, because until the cargo was on board the ship would not take on her water and her seagoing stores in the shape of bananas and taro.

Down through the paths where the great tree ferns grew on either side and the artu and jack-fruit trees cast their shadows, came the men of Levua, naked, like polished mahogany, and bearing the white perfumed billets of sandalwood. As they rafted them across the diamond-clear emerald-green water to where the *Kermadec* stood in the sapphire blue of twelve fathoms their songs came and went on the wind, the singers unconscious that all the business of that beach was futile as the labor of ants or the movement of shadows, made useless by the power of the pearl Le Moan carried behind her left ear.

The night before sailing, the water and fruit were brought on board and Peterson went ashore, taking Rantan with him, to have supper with Sanders. Carlin remained behind to look after the ship.

It was a lovely evening, the light of sunset rose-gold on the foam of the reefs and gilding the heights of Levua, the trees and the bursting torrent whose far-off voice filled the air with a mist of sound. Carlin, leaning on the rail, watched the boat row ashore, Sru at the stern oar, Peterson steering. He watched Peterson and the mate walk up the beach and disappear among the trees; they evidently had given orders that the boat was to wait for them on the beach, for, instead of returning, Sru and his men squatted on the sands, lit their pipes and fell to playing su-ken, tossing small pebbles and bits of coral high in the air and catching them skillfully on the backs of their hands.

Carlin lit his pipe. What he was watching was more interesting than any stage play, for he knew that the hour had struck, that the water and stores were on board and the *Kermadec* due to raise her anchor at sunrise.

He stood with his eyes fixed on the beach. The trader's house and store lay only a few hundred yards back among the trees and the native village a quarter of a mile beyond and close to the beginning of the sandalwood groves; would any trouble in the trader's house be heard by the people of the village? He put this question to himself in a general way and the answer came, "No." Not unless shots were fired—but then, unless there was shooting—how—how—how?

How what?

He did not enter into details with himself. He stood watching the men on the beach and then he saw Sru, as if suddenly tired of the game they were playing, rise up, stretch himself and stroll toward the boat. Near the boat a fishing canoe was beached, and Sru, having contemplated the boat for a minute or so, turned his attention to the canoe. He examined the outrigger, pressed his foot on it, and then bending over the interior picked out something. It was a fish spear with a single barb. Carlin remembered that Rantan on landing had looked into the canoe, as though from curiosity, or as if to make sure there was something in it—who could tell?

The fish spear seemed to interest Sru. He poised it as if for a throw, examined the barb, and then, spear in hand, came back to the fellows who were still playing their game and sat down. Carlin saw him exhibiting the spear to them, poising it, talking, telling no doubt old stories of fish he had killed on the reef at Soma; then, as if tired, he threw the thing on the sand beside him and lay back while the others continued their endless game.

Then came dark and the steadily increasing shower of starlight till the coalsack showed in the Milky Way like a hole punched in marble and the beach like a beach in ghost land, the figures on it clearly defined and especially now the figure of Sru, who had suddenly risen as though alarmed and was standing spear in hand.

Then at a run he made for the trees and vanished.

Carlin turned away from the rail and spat. The palms of his hands were sweating and something went knock, knock, knock, in his ears with every beat of his heart. The Kanakas on board were down in the fo'c's'le from which a thin island voice rose singing an endless song, the deck was clear only for the figure of Le Moan, and Carlin, half crazy with excitement, not daring to look toward the beach, walking like a drunken man up and down began to shout and talk to the girl.

"Hi, you Kanaka girl," cried Carlin, "something up on the beach. Lord God! she can't talk. Why can't you talk, hey? Whacha staring at me dumb for? Rouse the chaps forward, we'll be wantin' the anchor up." He went to the fo'c's'le head and kicked, calling to the hands below to tumble up, tumble up, and to hell with their singing for there was something going on on the beach. Then making a dash down to the saloon he beat and smashed at the store cupboard where he knew the whisky was kept, beat with his naked fists till the panels gave and he tore them out, and breaking the neck of a whisky bottle, drank with bleeding lips till a quarter of the bottle was gone.

Then he sat at the table, still clutching the bottle by the neck, but himself again. The nerve crisis had passed.

Yes, there was something going on upon the beach that night when, as Le Moan and the crew crowding to the port rail watched, the figure of Rantan suddenly broke from the trees and came running across the sands toward the boat, followed by Sru.

She heard the voice of Sru shouting to the boat Kanakas: "Tahuku has slain the white men! The trader and Pete'son have been slain." She saw the boat rushed out into the starlit water and as it came along toward the ship she saw some of the crew rush to the windlass and begin heaving the anchor chain short while others fought to get the gaskets off the jib and raise the mainsail. Already alarmed by Carlin, the words of Sru completed the business. Tahuku was out for killing and as they labored and shouted, Carlin hearing the uproar on deck, put the whisky bottle upstanding in a bunk and came tumbling up the ladder and almost into the arms of Rantan, who came tumbling over the rail.

CHAPTER XII.

THEY MAKE SOUTH.

THEN from the shore you might have seen the *Kermadec* like a frightened bird unfolding her wings as the boat came on board and the anchor came home, mainsail, foresail and jib filling to the steady wind coming like an accomplice out of the west, the forefoot cutting a ripple in the starlit waters of the lagoon and the stern swinging slowly toward Levua, where two white men lay dead in the trader's house and where in the village by the sandal grove Tahuku and his men lay asleep, unconscious of what civilization had done in their name.

Rantan, steering, brought the ship through the broad passage in the reefs where the starlight lit the spray of the breaking swell. The *Kermadec* lifting to the heave of the sea caught a stronger flow of wind and with the main boom swung to port headed due south.

Rantan handed the wheel to Sru and turned to a bundle lying in the port scuppers. It was Carlin sound asleep and snoring. The mate touched the beach comber with his foot and then, turning, went below.

He saw the locker smashed open and the whisky bottle in the bunk. He opened a porthole and flung the bottle out, and then turning to the locker, searched it. There were two more bottles in the locker, and having sent them after the first he closed the port and sat down at the table under the swinging lamp.

Kermadec, cargo, crew and ship's money were his. The crew knew nothing except that Tahuku had killed Pete'son and the white trader; there was no man to speak except Sru, who dared not speak, and Carlin, who knew nothing definite. In time and at a proper season it was possible that these might be rendered dumb and out of count, and this would be the story of the *Kermadec*:

Without her captain, murdered by the natives of Levua, and navigated by her mate, who knew little or nothing of navigation, she had attempted to make back to Soma, had missed Soma and found a big lagoon island, Karolin, which was not on the charts. There Sru, the bos'n, and Carlin, a white man, had died of fish poisoning, and there she had lain for a year—doing what——

"And what were you doing all that time, Mr. Rantan?" The question was being put to him before an imaginary admiralty court, and the answer, "Pearling," could not be given.

It was only now, with everything done and the ship his, that the final moves in the game were asking to be solved; up to this the first moves had claimed all his mental energy.

The *Kermadec* could be lost on some civilized coast quite easily; everything would be quite easy but the accounting for that infernal year—and it would take a year at least to make good in a pearl lagoon.

No, the *Kermadec* must never come within touch of civilization again. Once he was sure of the pearl ground being worth working the *Kermadec* must go. With the longboat he might get at last back to Soma or some of the Paumotuan islands—might.

The fact of his ignorance of navigation that had helped his story so far, hit him now on the other side, the fact so useful before a board-of-trade inquiry would help him little with the winds and tides and to the winds and tides he had committed himself in the long run.

He came on deck. The crew, all but the watch, had crowded down into the fo'c's'le where, all danger over and well at sea, they had turned in. Sru was still at the wheel and Le Moan, who had been talking to him, vanished forward as the mate appeared in the starlight and stood watching for a moment the far-off loom of the land.

Carlin still slept. He had rolled over on his back and was lying, mouth open and one hand stretched out on the deck planking, his snores mixed with the sound of the bow wash and the creaking of the gaff jaws and cordage.

Rantan looked into the binnacle, then with a glance at Carlin he turned to Sru.

The Paumotuan did not speak; he did not seem to see the mate or recognize his presence on deck. The whites of his eyeballs showed in the starlight, and as he steered, true as a hair to the course, his lips kept working as he muttered to himself.

He looked like a man scared, and steering alone, out of some imminent danger. That appearance of being isolated was the strangest thing. It made Rantan feel for a moment as though he were not there, as though the *Kermadec* were a ship deserted by all but the steersman.

Sru was scared. Steering true as an automaton, his mind was far away in the land of vacancy and pursued by Big Feller Mass'r Pete'son. It had come on him like a clap when Le Moan, approaching him, had asked where the bearded man was who had gone ashore and not returned. He had no fear of Le Moan or her question, but out of it Peterson had come, the white man whom he had always feared yet whom he had dared to kill. The appalling power that had strengthened his arm and mind, the power of the vision of tobacco unlimited, Swedish matches, knives, gin and Seidlitz powders, was no longer with him. Peterson was on his back, worse than any black dog, and now as he steered his head began to toss from side to side and like a man exalted by drink he began to sing and chatter while Rantan, who knew the Paumotuan mind and that in another minute the wheel would be dropped and the steersman loose and running amuck, drew close.

Then, suddenly, and with all the force of his body behind the blow he struck, and Sru fell like a poleaxed ox, while the mate, snapping at the spokes of the wheel, steadied the *Kermadec* and stood, his eye on the binnacle card, holding the ship on her course.

Sru lay where he fell just as Carlin lay where drink had struck him down. The fellows forward saw nothing, or if they did they made no movement, and the schooner, heeling deeper to the steadying breeze held on full south, while behind her the wake ran luminous with the gold of phosphorous and the silver of starlight.

Presently Sru sat up, then he rose to his feet. He remembered nothing, nothing of his terror or of the blow that had felled him. It seemed to him he must have fallen asleep at the wheel and that Rantan had relieved him.

CHAPTER XIII.

"SOUTH."

THE stars faded, the east grew crimson and the sun arose to show Levua gone; a sky without cloud, a sea without trace of sail or gull.

Le Moan, crouching in the bow with the risen sun hot on her left shoulder, saw the long levels of the marching swell as they came and passed, the *Kermadec* bowing to them; saw the distant southern sea line and beyond it the road to Karolin.

With her eyes shut and as the needle of the compass finds the north magnetic pole, she could have pointed to where Karolin lay, and as she gazed across the fields of the breeze-blown swell no trace of cloud troubled her mind; all was bright ahead. Sru had made it clear to her that no hurt would come to Taori, and with Peterson had gone any last lingering doubt that may have been in her mind. She trusted Sru and she trusted Rantan, who had spoken kindly to her, Carlin, and the Kanaka crew; of Peterson, the man who had terrified her first and the only trustable man on that ship, she had always had her doubts begotten by that first impression, by his beard, his gruff voice and what Sru had said about Peterson and how he would "swallow all," that is to say the pearls of Karolin; those mysterious pearls that the white men treasured and of which the charm hidden behind her ear had spoken to Sru.

She had always worn it as a protection and she had not the least doubt that it had spoken to Sru, just as a person might speak, and told him of those other pearls which she had often seen and played with when oysters were cast to rot on the beach for the sake of their shells. She had not the least doubt that to the talisman behind her ear was due this happy return and the elimination of Peterson. Was she wrong?

As she crouched, the back draft from the headsails fanning her hair, the *Kermadec* and her crew, the sea and its waves, all vanished, dissolved matter from which grew as by some process of recrystallization the beach of Karolin. The long south beach where the sand was whispering in the wind, the hot south beach where the sun-stricken palms lifted their fronds to the brassy sky of noon and the tender skies of dawn and evening, the beach above which the stars stood at night all turning with the turning dome of sky.

She saw a canoe paddling ashore and the canoeman now on the beach, his eyes crinkled against the sun, eyes colored like the sea when the gray of the squall mixes with its blue; the sun was on his red-gold hair and he trod the sands lightly, not as the Kanaka walks and moves; one might have fancied little wings upon his feet.

His body against the blazing lagoon showed like a flame of gold against a flame of blue. It was Taori. Taori as she had seen him first, on that day when he had come to bid Aioma to the canoe building.

It was as if Fate on that day had suddenly stripped away a veil, showing her the one thing to be desired, the only thing that would ever matter to her in this life or the next.

As she leaned, the breeze in her hair, and her mind like a bird fleeting far ahead into the distance, flying fish like silver shaftless arrowheads passed and flittered into the blue water, and now a turtle, floating asleep and disturbed by the warble of the bow wash and the creak of the onrushing schooner, sank quietly fathoms deep, leaving only a few bubbles on the swell.

Carlin had come on deck. Rantan had said not a word about the broken-open cupboard or the whisky. The ship was cleared of drink .and that was enough for him. When he came on deck a few minutes after the other, he found the beach comber leaning on the after rail.

A shark was hanging in the wake of the schooner. A deep-sea ship does not sail alone. She gives company and shelter to all sorts of fish from the remora that hangs on for a whole voyage, to the bonito that follows her maybe for a week.

In front of the shark, moving and glittering like spoon bait, a pilot fish showed in flashes of blue and gold.

Carlin turned from contemplation of these things to find Rantan at his side.

On going below for a wash after his night on deck Carlin had found the other at breakfast. Neither man had spoken of the events of the night before, nor did they now.

"Following us steady, isn't he?" said Carlin, turning again to contemplate the monster in the wake. "Don't seem to be swimming either and he's going all of eight knots. What's he after, following us like that?"

"Haven't you ever seen a shark before?" asked Rantan.

"Yes, and I've never seen good of them following a ship," replied Carlin, "and I'm not set on seeing them, 'specially now."

"Why now?" asked the mate.

But Carlin shied from the subject that was in both their minds.

"Oh, I don't know," said he. "I was thinking of the traverse in front of us. Say, now we're set for sailing for it, are you sure of hitting that island?"

"Sure," said the mate.

"Then you're better at the navigating job than you pretended to be," said Carlin. "What I like about you is the way you keep things hid."

"I've kept nothing hid," replied the other. "I'm crazy bad on the navigation, but I've got a navigator on board that'll take us there same as a bullet to a target."

"Sru?"

"Sru nothing! The Kanaka girl—she's a marayara. Ever heard of them? You get them among the Kanakas; every Kanaka has a pretty good sense of direction, but a marayara—take him away from his island and he'll home back like a pigeon if he has a canoe and can paddle long enough. That island we took the girl from is the pearl island. Born and bred there she was, and it's her center of everything. Sru got it all out of her and about the pearls and fixed up with her to take us back. Don't know what he's promised her, I reckon a few beads is all she wants and all she'll get, but that's how it lies; we've only got to push along due south by compass and she'll correct us. Leeway or set of current or any tomfool tricks of the needle don't matter to her. She never bothers about the compass; she sees where she wants to go to straight before her nose, same's when land's in sight you see it and steer for it."

"Can she steer?" asked Carlin, who had not been on deck the day Sru set her at the wheel.

Rantan turned to where the girl was standing in the bow, called her aft and gave the wheel over to her. When she had felt the ship, standing with her head slightly uptilted, she altered the course a few points; the *Kermadec* had been off her path by that amount owing to leeway or set of current.

From that moment the ship was in the hands of Le Moan. Tireless as only a being can be who exists always in the open air, she lived at the wheel with intervals for sleep and rest, always finding on her return the ship off her course, still heading south, but no longer on that exact and miraculous line drawn by instinct between herself and Karolin.

Error in the form of leeway or the influence of swell or the set of current could never push the *Kermadec* to east or west of that line, for the line moved with the ship, and as the journey shortened, like a steadily shortening string tied to a ball in centrifugal motion, it would bring the *Kermadec* at last to Karolin, no matter how far she was swung out of her course—blown fifty, a hundred, two hundred miles to east or west it would not matter, her head would turn to Karolin. The only flaw in that curious navigational instrument, the mind of Le Moan, was its blindness to distance, it could not tell the distance from Karolin, the pull being the same for any distance, and had the island risen suddenly before them on some dark night she would have piled the *Kermadec* on it unless warned by the sound of the reef.

Rantan kept the log going. He had a rough idea of the distance between Karolin and Levua, but he did not try to explain the log to Le Moan. If he had done so this labor would have been wasted. Le Moan had no idea of time as we conceive it, cut up into hours, minutes and seconds. Time for her was a thing, not an abstract idea, a thing ever present yet shifting in appearance—energy.

The recognition of time is simply the recognition of the rhythm of energy by energy itself. Le Moan recognized the rhythm in the tides, in the sunrises and sunsets, in the going and coming of the fish shoals, in slumber and waking life, but of those figments of man's intellect, hours, minutes, years, she had no idea. Always in touch with reality, she had come in vague touch with the truth that there is no past, no future—nothing ever but rhythmic alterations of the present.

But, though unable to grasp the division of the real day into empirical fractions, the compass, that triumph of man's intellect, presented no difficulties to her. When Rantan explained its pointing to her she understood; the needle pointed away from Karolin.

The fleur-de-lis on the card which seemed to her vaguely like the head of a fish spear pointed away from Karolin, that is away from the south.

The compass card moved, she did not know that the compass card was absolutely steady, that this appearance of movement was a delusion caused by the altered course of the ship, that the ship pivoted on the card, not the card on the ship.

If she let the ship off her course to the east, the card moved and her sense of direction told her at once that the fleur-de-lis was still pointing away from Karolin. She spoke on this matter to Sru. Sru, who had made only two voyages on ships and who was yet a capable steersman, had quite taken for granted his first captain's explanation to him of the compass; there was a god in it that held it just so and if Sru let the card wabble from the course set down the god would most likely come out of the binnacle and kick Sru into the middle of next week. He was a Yankee skipper and he had made an excellent steersman of Sru.

Le Moan understood; she believed in gods, from Naniwa the shark-toothed one to Nan the benign, believed in them, just as white men believe in their gods—with reservations; but this was different from anything she had hitherto conceived of a deity. He must be very small to be contained in the binnacle, very small and set of purpose, always pointing with the spearhead away from Karolin. Why?

Rantan had pointed down to the spearhead and away north and told her it always pointed there, always away from the direction of Karolin. Why?

She had not asked him why the card moved, or seemed to move, Sru having already told her.

The feeling came to her that the little imprisoned something was against going to Karolin, but no one seemed to mind it, yet they were always consulting it—Rantan when he took the wheel, and Sru and Maru, who was also a good steersman.

Every day at noon Rantan would appear on deck and take an observation of the sun with Peterson's sextant, while Carlin, if he were on deck, would cuff himself on the thigh and turn and lean over the rail tc laugh unobserved.

Rantan was only fooling, keeping up appearances, so that the crew might fancy him as good as Peterson in finding his way on the sea. Sru had never told the others that they depended entirely on Le Moan. The fact that she was a way finder was known to them, but it is as well for the after guard to keep up appearances. Rantan might as well have been looking at the sun through a beer bottle for all he knew of the matter, but the crew could not tell that. So, as a navigator, he held a place in their minds above the girl.

At night when the binnacle lamp was lit and she happened to be at the wheel her eyes would wander to the trembling card, she would put the ship a bit off its course just to see it move, noticing that it always moved in the same manner in a reverse direction to the alteration in course. If the head of the schooner turned to starboard, the card would rotate to port and vice versa. She studied its doings as one studies the doings of a strange animal, but she never caught it altering its mind or varying its action.

At night it always seemed to her that the thing in the binnacle, whether god or devil, was inimical to her, or at all events warning her not to take the ship back to Karolin; by day it did not matter.

So under the stars and over the phosphorescent sea the *Kermadec* headed south, ever south, the blazing dawns leaping over the port rail and the gigantic sunsets dyeing with the blood of Titans the skies to starboard, till one morning Le Moan, handing the wheel to Rantan, pointed ahead and then walked forward. Her work was done. Far ahead, paling the sky, shone the lagoon blaze of Karolin.

To be continued in the next issue, on the news stands September 7th.

AN IMPREGNABLE DEFENSE

ONE day while Warren G. Harding was reading the newspaper clippings which were passed to him by his secretary, Mr. George B. Christian, Jr. As all the clippings dealt with the president's policies and achievements, and as they had been cut for the most part from Democratic newspapers, the presidential eye fell with monotonous, not to say sickening, regularity upon reading matter that was by no means full of tributes to the chief executive.

At last Mr. Harding put down the mass of clippings and regarded the ceiling with reminiscent eye.

"On one occasion in the dim and distant past," he said, "a colored man was taken before a judge who thus addressed him: 'According to the record of your conduct, my friend, you have already been thirty-nine times convicted of petty theft and similar misbehavior.'

" 'Well, jedge,' the prisoner responded, a hint of sadness in his voice, 'man is not puffect.' "

Not a Dude Ranch

By Howard R. Marsh

Author of "Liberty and the Pursuit of Gold," "Susceptibility Plus," Etc.

The Mojave Desert isn't much of a place for tenderfeet, but as "Itching Foot" Davis concluded, it may be a very fine place for a honeymoon.

THREE methods for telling the time of day the people of Liberty had, and of the three the watch was considered the least reliable. There were several timepieces in the little desert settlement: each of the twelve families living there boasted at least one. They ranged in size from grandfather's clock which wistful-eyed little Sid Satterwaite had brought from Wessex, England, eleven years before, along with a wife, four children and eighty-five dollars, to the thin white-gold wrist watch belonging to Mrs. Sam Slade. The wrist watch was quite modern; Sam brought it back as a peace offering after he overstayed his leave in one of the large and iniquitous cities over the mountains.

But new or old, large or small, the people of Liberty didn't much trust watches and clocks. Such chronometers have to be set and regulated occasionally; they imply proximity to telegraph offices and jewelry stores, of which the nearest to Liberty were sixty desert miles distant. At one time the Libertians had taken up a collection and purchased a watch for Bill Parnall, the stage driver, hoping he would provide a daily check on the time. But Bill had given the timepiece away three days later to a begging prospector. He never could refuse a desert rat who was down and out, he explained apologetically. Of course strangers occasionally came through Liberty; one day four arrived almost together. But one doesn't like to bother strangers continually asking them the time. Besides, sometimes the owners of good watches refused to show them, fearing quick robbery. A stranger would expect almost anything in Liberty.

The second method of time telling was gauging the fairly trustworthy sun. Every adult Libertian knew that when the tips of the Panamint range far to the east were touched with gold it was five o'clock in March and four thirty in June. When the tips of the High Sierras, against which Liberty squatted, were gilded, then it was five ten or four forty, according to the time of year. Finally, when the lone tree in the region, the squat growth which gave Cottonwood Creek its name, cast its shadow directly over a certain piece of creosote bush it was noon any time of the year. But such a method of determining the time was laborious; it required a certain amount of computation, and computation, like every other unnecessary effort on the desert, was something to be avoided.

The final word in chronometers was "Itching Foot" Davis. The old proprietor of the Liberty House hostelry could always be trusted. When he padded downstairs it was six five o'clock in the morning, March, June or December. When he carried a pail of water to the north end of the hotel porch and submerged his feet it was between ten o'clock and three minutes after, New Year's Day or the Fourth of July. Finally, when he padded heavily down the sand road to Cottonwood Creek and sank his feet in the snow-chilled water it was one twenty any afternoon of the year. For Itching Foot was perfectly regulated and timed—by his feet.

Probably no other man on the Mojave Desert had chilblains; the ailment isn't common where the temperature periodically forces the mercury out the top of the thermometers. And probably few men, anywhere, had such sensitive, delicate chilblains as old Itching Foot. They allowed him to sleep just so long; they drove him downstairs at a certain hour, out on the porch a little later, and finally demanded the freezing treatment of Cottonwood Creek. There was no doubt that they were terribly aggravating to the old proprietor, but they were convenient to the Libertians. Easy for the desert dwellers to tell what time it was when Itching Foot appeared. A further advantage was, that the chilblains gave warning of the terrible "northers," the sandstorms which swept down the desert valley, and of the very few spring rains. At least Itching Foot claimed they did, just as he claimed that they drove him from place to place with better than clocklike regularity. "It's not habit, it's itching," he maintained.

Old Itching Foot had carried his pail of water out on the hotel porch this March morning, which proved the time to be three minutes after ten. He sat in a broad, cane-bottom chair, which his bulk completely filled. He was a huge man, was Itching Foot, a mountain of a man, six feet two in his customarily bare feet and with a girth almost equal his height. He bulged mightily at the belt—if he had worn a belt—and bulged again higher up, where a series of chins made way grudgingly for each other. His face was like the moon in shape and the sun in color, a red morning sun shining through the ground mist. Even the top of his head was red, for he was bald except for a tuft of gray hair which raised itself in a perpetual question mark.

Perhaps that hirsute interrogation point was the index to Itching Foot's character. During the sixty-five years of his life he had never ceased to wonder why things were as they were. Something of that eternal questioning showed in the little blue eyes, sunk in the folds of his face. They were expressive eyes, anyway. They clouded with pain at trifling things—the unequal struggle between a rattler and a cactus wren, a sliver in the hand of little "Buddie" Satterwaite, a thirst-weakened steer toppling on the trail. Likewise they beamed with pleasure very easily. When Marie Oretez asked him to be godfather to the last baby; when Georgia Maynard confided her tender feelings for Bill Parnall, when he and Sid Satterwaite found two lost ewes for which they had searched all night—then Itching Foot's pale little eyes glistened like a child's with pleasure.

Big, gruff, tender-hearted, profane—such was Itching Foot Davis, the czar of Liberty, proprietor of the Liberty House, and ruler by power of personality over a hundred square miles of desert. Now, sitting on the porch of the Liberty House he was viewing his domain just as he had viewed it hundreds of other mornings. He stared out over the desert, doing a minimum of thinking. To the west the High Sierras cut off the landscape like a wall with their cloud-piercing, snow-tipped peaks. Few trails extended that way. But northward, along the base of the mountains, meandered the Mojave-Bishop road, the main artery of travel to which the twelve houses of Liberty clung as though fearing to be lost on the desert. East of Liberty the trails spread fanwise, crossing and recrossing the black lava streak which scarred the valley. The desert to the south was unbroken as far as the eye could see—a gray-green ocean of encelia, creosote bush and sage with here and there misshapen and writhing Joshua trees raising stunted arms to the depthless blue sky.

It was toward the east that Itching Foot Davis was staring as he sat with his feet in the pail of water on the Liberty House porch. Over one of the trails hovered a dust cloud, indicating action. Itching Foot enjoyed the promise of the dust; he longed for action after many monotonous days.

"Wong Tong!" he shouted toward the lean-to kitchen. "Wong Tong!" His voice was a deep bass which broke shrilly when he was excited.

From the kitchen slid a little, wizened Chinese, the factotum of the Liberty House. He carried a pail of fresh water and a sheet. Without a word he put the pail at his master's feet and prepared to hang the sheet across the porch. Itching Foot believed that moisture in the air was good for his chilblains and one way to get moisture was to allow a dripping sheet to swing in the hot atmosphere.

"Never mind the sheet, Wong Tong," Itching Foot ordered as he shifted his feet to the fresh water. "I want to watch. Look out there. No, on the Terrapin Ranch Trail. See it! Now what do you suppose is making all that dust? I can't figure it out. Unless the Terrapin boys are driving the cattle to the mountains, and it's weeks too early for that, even in a dry year like this. It isn't horses; too much dust. What in blazes is it?"

Wong Tong shrugged his shoulders. "Mebbe if Mr. Davis watch long enough he find out," the Chinese suggested. "Mebbe it's three hundred sixty-nine coyotes coming." Wong Tong had an uneasy fear of the coyotes which descended nightly from the foothills to search the garbage dump of the Liberty House.

"Criminy, Wong Tong, you're a help!" scoffed Itching Foot. "Three hundred sixty—say, maybe it's a borax train that's got lost."

"Mebbe," agreed Wong Tong tonelessly. "Shall I get your gun to shoot the three hundred sixty-nine coy——"

"Get to hell back to the kitchen and make some soda biscuits for lunch!" roared Itching Foot. "And don't use flapjack flour this time." He settled himself to wait.

Twenty minutes later he strode to the edge of the porch and shaded his eyes. The dust cloud hovered over the last rise of ground east of the Liberty House; beneath it chugged a strange procession. "Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Itching Foot. "That's the funniest thing I ever saw crawling the desert!"

II.

Liberty settlement had seen many manners of conveyance. Horses, the wiry little desert bronchos with wicked eyes and quick hoofs, were the most common. Next in numbers came the pot-bellied burros of prospectors and sheepmen, generally carrying on their bony hips their own weight in packs. Occasionally there were automobiles of the more daring tourists or location seekers for the movies. Little carts drawn by goats, two-wheeled, mule-propelled wagons, even ox teams had proceeded down the single dusty street of the settlement. But never had Liberty seen such a vehicle as "Sandy" McAllister, major-domo of the Terrapin Ranch, drove up to the Liberty House.

The four old chuck wagons of the Terrapin outfit were chained and wired together. Each of them had been equipped with board cross seats like ballyhoo busses, and the whole procession was drawn by a track-laying tractor. On the tractor seat was Sandy McAllister. His little face was red and disgusted, his eyes expressed both shame and anger. Nearing the Liberty House he looked up and saw Itching Foot Davis, on whose round face mirth was chasing wonder. With an oath which sounded above the roar of the tractor Sandy jerked the procession to a halt, vaulted from the seat and strode to the porch of the Liberty House.

"What's the idea of imitating the laughing hyena, Itching Foot?" he demanded angrily. Sandy's Scotch temper rasped his words.

"I—I——" began Itching Foot, then sank gasping into his chair. The sight of Sandy McAllister, who ordinarily rode the fastest bronc on the desert, dismounting lamely from a three-mile-an-hour tractor was too much for the risibilities of the old hotel proprietor. His huge form shook; he choked; his face purpled. At last he gained control of himself. "And what's the idea of putting on the circus parade?" he counter-questioned. "Criminy, if that isn't the nuttiest outfit for a cowman to be driving! God bless your damned heart, Sandy, what in the name of——"

"Aw, shut up!" ordered the disgruntled Sandy. "Can't you see I'm demonstrating racing cars?"

"But what's——"

"Shut up!"

"I'm shut! Wong Tong! Hey! Bring Mr. McAllister a pitcher of water."

Wong Tong had been watching the procession with curious eyes from the kitchen window. Now he hastened out with the water. "Mebbe Mr. McAllister take coyotes for ride," he suggested. "Carry them all away, mebbe, please."

"Shut up!" shouted Itching Foot and

Sandy McAllister together. Then the two men sat silently. Itching Foot's childish curiosity caused him to shift uneasily in his chair, but he must wait. Time would divulge the secret, as time divulges all things on the desert.

It was half an hour later when Peter Kieth, owner of the Terrapin Ranch, rode up on his piebald mare, Queenie. He dropped the reins over his mount's head and vaulted across the porch railing. Mr. Kieth didn't seem particularly happy. He too, was hot, tired and red-faced. His lean body hunched belligerently.

"See you got here all right, Sandy," he said. "Have you told Itching Foot?"

"Not a word but 'damn you,'" the hotel proprietor declared. "What's the idea, Kieth? Getting a crew of Indian irrigators to enlarge your alfalfa patch?"

"No. Worse than that. Here, read this!" From his inside pocket Owner Kieth produced a letter and handed it to Itching Foot. "That's the trouble," he said.

As Itching Foot opened the missive a newspaper clipping dropped to the floor. Sandy shuffled a heavy foot over it but made no motion to pick it up. Itching Foot read aloud:

> "Dear Mr. Kieth: Leave it to the Lightning Advertising Promoters, Inc., to secure results. When you wrote suggesting you'd take a few boarders on your ranch if we would secure them, our copy writers went into executive session. The result was an advertisement which startled even the most blasé. A second result is that forty-six tourists are leaving Los Angeles the night of the seventh for your ranch. We can send as many or more each week, as long as the tourist season lasts. We have taken care of all train arrangements. A special car will be shunted off at Mojave and up Owens Valley on the accommodation freight, arriving at Coyote Crossing about noon of the eighth. We collected $100 from each person, and gave a receipt for car fare and one week at your ranch. We inclose $2,880, which is the balance left after expenses and our regular ten-per-cent commission for such deals. We are inclosing a copy of our advertisement so you may see how we secure results, and also what we promised your patrons. Yours for pep and punch, The Lightning Advertising Promoters, Inc., by A. J. Henry."

Itching Foot stared from the letter to Kieth, to Sandy McAllister, then back at the letter. Finally he reached over and touched Sandy's shoulder. "I don't blame you for feeling bad, Sandy," he said feelingly. "A dude ranch! Oh, my God! The good old Terrapin degenerated into a dude ranch! Kieth, I don't think that you and I are on speaking terms henceforth. Why in the devil did you do a thing like that?"

The owner of the Terrapin wasn't in good temper at best; Itching Foot's words caused an explosion. "Do it?" Kieth shouted. "Well, how in blue blazes was I to pay the wages of Sandy here and the eleven other boys working for me unless I did something? Cattle selling at nothing minus on the hoof; alfalfa thirty dollars a ton and all natural feed dried up? I had to do something or quit. I wrote to those birds in Los Angeles asking them to send on a few boarders. And see what I get! Forty-six! That's a few, isn't it? And that isn't the worst. Those damn-fool agents have promised the dudes—— Sandy, move your hoof and let Itching Foot see that advertisement himself."

Sandy McAllister pushed the newspaper clipping disgustedly toward the hotel proprietor. In black type it read:

> THRILLS OF THE WEST.
>
> Here is none of your ordinary dude ranch, the kind your friends have all seen. Here is the real Wild West. Here is no summer resort on the outskirts of a city nor an automobile camp against the railroad. Here are the "bad lands."
>
> THIS IS YOUR CHANCE! The proprietor of one of the largest and wildest of all Western ranches has consented to take a few adventuresome people, merely to show them what the real West is like. Far out on the desert where the Indians still rove, where rustlers are strung up, where rattlesnakes abound and coyotes slip down from the hills at night, where the real cowboy throws his lariat and men are men—that's where he's inviting you.
>
> NOT FOR COWARDS, but for men and women seeking the thrills of life in God's outdoors, far from the whistle of trains and the click of telegraphs. Arrangements can be made for a few such civilization-weary people upon whom all tawdry excitements have palled by calling Mr. A. J. Henry at Hemlock 9899. If you feel the thrill you are urged to respond before it is too late.
>
> NOT A DUDE RANCH!

"That," said Itching Foot Davis after twice reading the advertisement, "is what I call the thunder that goes with the lightning. Criminy, I didn't know in what a tough place we-all live."

"But what'll we do about it?" asked Peter Kieth. "These civilization-weary people, get that, will want more than tawdry excitements, get that, or else want their money back. What's the answer?"

"The answer," said Itching Foot judiciously, "is to telegraph the Thunder-and-Lightning Promoters from Hard City, telling them that the Terrapin Ranch burned down last night and all arrangements are canceled. Then go to the bank at Mojave and borrow your money like an honest cattleman."

"Yeah," scoffed Kieth. "But to-day happens to be the eighth and those civilization-weary birds are halfway up Owens Valley by this time. You see, the boys were so busy fence mending that none of them got down to the road for the mail until last night. Besides, Itching Foot, you haven't forgotten that the letter said something about a check for most three thousand dollars? I can use that little pocket money to avoid bankruptcy. Now try another answer."

"Right-o! There's only one left. That's to shoot a few Indians, hang a few rustlers, produce some snakes and live up to Mr. Lightning's prospectus. And if I was you," Itching Foot added, stamping his bare feet on the porch floor, "I'd go that one better. I'd make it so damned exciting for the dudes that one day would be plenty. They'd get their money's worthy and get for home. That's what I'd do, if you're asking me."

"That thought," said Peter Kieth, "had occurred to Sandy and me. And that's why we stopped here. We thought if there was one man in the State who could put on a real wild West show it'd be old Itching Foot Davis, who fought Indians in Garden Valley, Nevada, shot placer thieves on the Merced and——"

"Shut up!" ordered Itching Foot. "I'll tell you about that another time. Right now I need to do some planning and arranging. Sandy, it's after eleven; you better take your circus down to Coyote Crossing and meet the birds. It'll take better than an hour on that steed of yours."

"Let 'em wait," muttered McAllister, then catching a sign from his boss he marched sullenly to the tractor. A moment later the procession was chugging southward.

"Now," said Itching Foot, "we'll need to work fast. Mr. Kieth, go find Sid Satterwaite, Sam Slade and any of the other boys around. Bring 'em here. Ask Mateo Oretez to pound around that pile of mesquite he cut last fall and capture us a couple of rattlers. Good, dead ones. I'll get Wong Tong to load all the bedding and food we have in the hotel into the buckboard and start up to the Terrapin. You'll need the supplies and you'll need Wong Tong. Then we'll get ready for the Indian fight and rustler hanging, to say nothing of rattlesnakes and coyotes. God bless your damned miserly heart, Kieth, but I'm going to enjoy the next twenty-four hours! Incidentally, my feet are whispering to me that we're going to have a 'norther!' That'll swing the bodies of the hanging rustlers, eh?"

III.

Sandy McAllister hadn't spoken a word since the forty-six "dudes" arrived. When they climbed off the special car attached to the accommodation freight at Coyote Crossing Sandy waved a freckled hand disgustedly toward the string of chuck wagons, then jumped back on his tractor. Meekly the begoggled and rather awe-struck tourists threw their baggage behind the temporary seats and climbed aboard. There was delay for a few moments while two little chin-lacking men toted a couple of leather trunks into the rear wagon. Then the roar of the tractor and the rattle of wagons shattered the desert silence. Sandy was leading the procession on its dusty way through alkali and sand, sage and greasewood, to the Liberty House and the Terrapin Ranch.

A queer conglomeration of people the "civilization-weary" were. They expressed themselves in almost-hysterical giggles and shrill-voiced remarks. There were six or eight energetic and full-bodied women whose faces had that discontented, haughty expression of those who have arrived financially but not quite passed the sacred portals socially. Perhaps these women believed that tales of their experiences on the wild, wild desert would help them into the inner circles.

Of the men in the party there were very few and most of them were obviously being dragged into the "bad lands" against their wills; meek, mild-eyed men, almost as alike as sheep following their bellwethers.

Only four of the "dudes" seemed to maintain individuality. Leslie Pigott, a large, red-faced, nearsighted manufacturer of steam pumps, was one; his snapping, black-eyed little wife was the second and his daughter, Eloise, a third. The other distinctive individual was a big, yellow-haired youth who slunk from the train behind the others and found a place in the last wagon with the two chinless wonders and their leather trunks.

For eighty minutes Sandy McAllister guided the procession northward toward the Liberty House. Even when he had to stop to replenish the tractor's gasoline supply from the first wagon he didn't speak. The passengers shouted questions, facetious remarks, expressions of wonder, but dour-faced Sandy maintained an excellent imitation of deafness. Only when he approached the Liberty House did Sandy's face brighten. He had heard, above the roar of his motor, the unmistakable clatter of guns, and that sound was dear to Sandy's heart. He jerked the procession to a stop just beyond the trickle of Cottonwood Creek, stiffly dismounted and strode up the road to investigate.

"Sounds like gun firing," suggested one of the chin-lacking men in the last wagon to his drooping mustache.

"Sure," agreed the big, blond youth.

"What's that?" shrilled a certain Miss Anita Stebbins, high-school teacher of mathematics, Latin and sewing. "Guns did you say?" The school-teachers crowded closer to each other and the society matrons pulled their husbands behind them. The thrill hunters were talking of barricades, Indians, and how a boy friend had been injured last Fourth of July with a pistol, when Sandy rejoined them. All signs of disgust had vanished from Sandy's freckled face; he seemed quite happy. He climbed on the wheel of the front wagon and addressed the tourists.

"Now folks, I don't want any of you to get excited. They're having a little trouble in the settlement, but nothing much to worry about. Some Indians from Death Valley have come over and are trying to drive the people of Liberty from their homes. They used to live here and still think they own the land. Once a year, after they've finished packing borax in Death Valley, they get liquored up and come over here to shoot it out. But there's no danger to us unless we get in the path of a stray bullet. I think, though, that all of you better dig down behind the sideboards. There's a space of about sixty yards where we're in range. Drop out of sight right now!"

There was a moment's silence, denoting mental debate. Was that little, freckle-faced, dusty fellow fooling them or not? The second question in most minds was: But why take a chance? The answer to this question was a concerted sprawling on the floor boards of the wagons. Only Leslie Pigott of steam-pump fame, and the big, yellow-haired youth in the last wagon remained bolt upright.

The tractor and its load proceeded for about fifty yards, then stopped. To most of the passengers the beat of their hearts continued to sound as loudly as had the chug of the motor. Then Sandy's shrill voice reached them.

"Folks, I don't want any of you to look toward the cottonwood tree on the right. There's a couple of rustlers strung up there that the Liberty boys caught yesterday afternoon. They look rather nasty swinging in the air, so please don't look to the right."

Immediately forty-four heads peered over the sideboards; eighty-eight gloating eyes saw two limp forms swaying under the lone tree.

"Duck!" shouted Sandy. He had seen the head of one of the rustlers turn to stare curiously; to his quick ears came a murmur, "For God's sake, Sandy, hurry! This framework of Sam's is slipping."

Sandy McAllister grinned. He wondered how strongly Sid Satterwaite and Mateo Oretez had protested against Itching Foot's orders to be hanged.

Now the tractor pulled its train beside the corral of the Liberty House. The passengers stretched stiffly and climbed to their feet. Suddenly there was a fusillade of shots. Bullets whined over the desert; splinters flew from projecting portions of the wagons.

"Duck!" shrilled Sandy McAllister. More bullets thudded into the leather trunks in the last wagon. "Duck!" The passengers needed no order. This time even red-faced Leslie Pigott dropped to dignified concealment behind the sideboards.

Sandy McAllister leaped from his seat and slipped back of the Liberty House. There he plumped into the fat form of Itching Foot Davis who was reloading a six-shooter. Beside him, Peter Kieth, owner of the Terrapin Ranch, and Sam Slade, keeper of Liberty's oil station, were firing steadily at the leather trunks, their faces beaming with boyish pleasure.

"Say," demanded Sandy, "can't one of

you fellows let out a war whoop? It'd be damned effective now."

"Lookit, quick!" ordered Itching Foot. "What's the idea?"

Straight toward the imitation Indians was sauntering the tall, blond youth who had dropped from the last wagon. He rounded the corner of the Liberty House and faced the four sheepish-looking conspirators.

"Aw say, what's the idea?" Unconsciously he repeated Itching Foot's question. "What's the big idea?"

Without a word Itching Foot grasped the youth's shoulders and pulled him out of sight. Peter Kieth made his mouth move, but no words came; Sam Slade blew out his cheeks and pursed his lips; Sandy McAllister patted the sand with nervous feet. Itching Foot regained his composure first. "Say, boy, aren't you afraid of bullets?" he demanded. "And Indians?"

"Not around here," the youth replied confidently. "I was raised up at Bishop, you know."

"Then what are you doing with the dude crowd?" demanded Itching Foot angrily.

"That's my business. And why are you ruining a couple of good trunks?"

"And that's my business," echoed Itching Foot. Then he extended a huge hamlike hand. He liked the youth, liked him immediately and immensely, liked the appealing boyishness of his manner, the frankness of his blue eyes, the easy grin. "Let's touch paws, lad! We aren't going to squabble." He turned to Sandy McAllister. "Say, go tell the tenderfeet that the Indians have been driven off. Take them into the Liberty House dining room. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Satterwaite have rustled some food for them. Mr. Kieth, go in and meet your civilization-weary guests and then trot for home. The lad, here, and I will go down to the cottonwood and unstring Sid and Mateo. They must be tired of swaying in the breeze."

IV.

Stride for stride, Itching Foot and Tom Powers, christened Thomas Treat Powers, walked over the sand and sage toward Cottonwood Creek. There was a similarity in the two men, despite the disparity of ages. Both had grown on a generous scale, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, with big hands and feet, large features and widely spaced eyes. Add forty years and sixty pounds to young Tom Powers, replace his curly yellow hair with a single gray tuft, and the two might easily have been mistaken for brothers.

Perhaps their similarity accounted for the kinship the men felt for each other. Certainly a bond had been established between them as soon as their eyes met. Now young Powers strengthened the tie.

"You're Mr. Davis, aren't you?" he asked. "Couldn't miss you from dad's description. He knew you in the old days, right after you crossed the line from Nevada. He's told me about that trick you and he played on the Piute war party a hundred times, and about the Red Gold mine and——"

"Love you, lad, you must be old Judge Powers' son! Bless my heart, but I've been trying to place you. Haven't seen you in ten years, I guess. Not since the judge died. Wonderful fellow, your dad. Are you like him?"

"Not much, I guess," Powers confessed ruefully. "Dad was a great one for cattle. I'm interested in mining. Then dad had a place in the community and I don't amount to much—yet." The youth smiled his easy smile.

"But you'll get there," promised Itching Foot. "You know it, too. Judge Powers' son has the stuff, I'm telling you. Say, you know how your dad got the name of judge? Because he was the fairest man in this region—that is, until I came." Itching Foot, too, grinned. "We always took sheepmen and squatters and rustlers to your dad for judgment. He decided—but there I go reminiscing again. What I want to know is why you're with this bunch of tenderfeet."

Tom Powers stared out over the desert thoughtfully. "No," he said at last, "guess not."

"Guess not what?" demanded Itching Foot.

"Guess I won't tell you."

"Sure! That's all right. Didn't mean to be prying into your business. Maybe you've got a mine or something out here. Sure. I'm not curious. Maybe you were sent out by those Lightning Promoters to guide the party. You needn't tell me; of course not. Only I was just wondering how you——"

"Your rustlers over there are begging for help," interrupted Powers, pointing to the cottonwood tree.

"Yeah, I see. I'll get them down. Now don't tell me why you're out here. Not till I get the boys cut down, anyway."

Five minutes later Itching Foot sent sputtering Mateo Oretez and disgusted old Sid Satterwaite back to Liberty with orders to keep out of sight until the tenderfoot party had left. Then he removed his shoes and lowered his feet into the chill water of Cottonwood Creek. All procedure was upset to-day; Itching Foot at the creek at one forty instead of one twenty!

"Chilblains," he said, splashing his feet in the water. "Very bad when I get excited. Oh, yes, you had just started to tell me why you were mixed up in that bunch of human truck. Sorry I interrupted. Come, sit beside me, Tom. I'm listening."

"I see I might as well tell you now as later," Powers decided with a grin. "At that, maybe you can help me." He squatted beside the old hotel proprietor.

"Sure I can help you," Itching Foot boasted. "I can help any one. Go ahead and tell me. You see, I've got to get something on you. Simply must. Otherwise you might kick over our whole party by telling these tenderfeet about the fake Indians and the rustlers and everything."

"Just what is the big idea about the shooting and hanging and this wild West show?"

"Trying to give the dudes their money's worth, of course," explained Itching Foot. "Trying to drive 'em home, too. The shorter they stay, the more money Peter Kieth will make, the more apt his vaqueros are to stick to their job, and the more pleasant the desert will be. If they stay forty-eight hours, every man, coyote and sand lizard on the desert will die an insane death or move over the Panamints into Lost Hope Valley. There, my cards are on the table. Let's face some of yours."

"All right. The hole card is the queen of hearts. Then there's the king and queen of clubs."

Itching Foot squinted his little blue eyes, wrinkled his bald head. Then, "I get you," he said. "There's a girl in the party you're loco over, eh? And then there's papa and mamma, who don't hanker after you?"

"You've hit it first guess. I'm the li'l' ol' deuce. They're trying to shuffle me out, but I keep turning up."

"Good! Now to details, names, crimes, places and so forth."

"The girl is Eloise Pigott. You can't miss her in that crowd. The little black-eyed, beautiful girl with a smile that knocks your pins from under you, a voice that makes your heart pound, a way of looking at you which makes your ears wiggle and all the blood rush to your head and sing, and——"

"Just a minute, lad. You're talking about yourself, not me. I haven't seen her yet, you know."

"When you do," promised Tom Powers, "you'll never look away."

"I should judge," Itching Foot announced judicially, "that you are rather fond of the girl. Now what's the reason pa and ma don't want you for their son-in-law?"

"They think Eloise should marry a prince or a duke or a millionaire instead of a young mining engineer on his first vacation. She should, too. But I can't help it if I'm crazy about her, can I?"

"We'll just pretend," said Itching Foot, "that you are driven by the altruistic motive of changing the ugly name of Pigott to the nice name of Powers without bothering the girl to change the monogram on her linen. The point is, how does she feel about it?"

"Well, I think—she looks at me sometimes in such a way—and presses my hand—she ran her fingers through my hair—well——"

"That doesn't mean anything any more. But has she told you she loves children, dogs and the desert?"

"Yes—she really does."

"Then you're lariated and ready for the branding iron."

"Ready is right," agreed Tom Powers. He patted the breast of his rough homespun suit. "I've got the license here. It cheered me up, you know, just getting it."

"Sure. Did the girl tell you about coming out here?"

"Yes. Mrs. Pigott thought it would be a great experience, roughing it on the desert, and Mr. Pigott thought it would take Eloise away from me, so they came. Eloise told me about it and I forced my way into the party. Mr. Pigott saw me on the train. I thought for a minute he'd have a stroke.

Then he looked for something to hit me with. I slunk away. But now I'm afraid to go near Eloise and she's afraid even to look in my direction. Mr. Pigott—he's that big, red-faced man with bulging eyes—will watch her so she won't have a chance to say 'Hello' to me. That's what I meant when I said you might be able to help. You know, kidnap Mr. Pigott, or have his horse run away with him or get him lost or something. Could you?" Hope was beginning to chase gloom from Powers' broad face.

"Help you?" questioned Itching Foot. "Say, if necessary I'll throw Mr. Pigott and sit on him while you make love to his daughter. You just keep quiet about this fake wild-West business and I'll see that you are rewarded." Laboriously he raised his huge bulk. "Come on," he said. "Those tenderfeet will be through lunch and ready for another thrill." He grinned like a mischievous boy. "It's snakes this time. Snakes, buzzards, 'phoby' skunks and daring death in the cactus."

V.

"At your right, ladies and gentlemen, are several of the great barrel cacti!" Itching Foot was making his tenth speech of the day. Periodically Sandy McAllister had halted the tractor, Itching Foot taken his place on the front wheel of the first wagon, and in the best ballyhoo manner expanded on the wildness of the desert to a chorus of ohs and ahs from the tenderfeet. Already he had warned the wondering tourists of the dangerous bite of the "phoby" skunk, of the terrible venom of the "black widow" desert tarantula; he had elaborated on the terrible, buzzard-haunted deaths from mineral poisoning and snake bite, the tortures of thirst and exhaustion. Undoubtedly he was giving the "civilization-weary" their money's worth of thrills. "No," he had admitted in answer to a question of Miss Anita Stebbins, "we didn't have to kill many of the Indians to-day; they were scared off easy."

Now he was well launched into another dissertation. "The barrel cactus has saved hundreds of lives. Men, dying from thirst, owe their existence to the moisture in that round, thorny barrel plant. It grows as high as six feet and is sometimes thirty inches or more in diameter. I'll now show you how it can be opened and water obtained from it. But first, I want two of the younger people in this party to go to that Joshua tree over there." He pointed above the regularly spaced greasewood to a stunted, misshapen growth five hundred yards away. "It is now in bloom, and a flower from it is one of the rarest of all desert specimens." Appraisingly Itching Foot ran his little eyes over the party.

"You!" he called. "The big young fellow in the back wagon!" Young Tom Powers came forward with alacrity. "And you!" Itching Foot indicated Eloise Pigott. Instantly, eagerly, she was over the side of the wagon and beside young Powers.

"Eloise!" shouted her pop-eyed father. "Come back here!" He put his legs out of the wagon box to leap after the girl.

"Look out!" shrilled Itching Foot. "Stop, man!" He whipped his six-shooter from its holster, shot twice into the ground beside the wheels. "Run, you two!" He fired again, then dropped out of sight under the wagon. A moment later a very dead rattlesnake came twisting through the air and landed in a creosote bush twenty feet away. There was a chorus of screams and above it the bellow of Mr. Pigott of steam-pump fame, "Eloise! Come back here!"

"Beat it!" counter-ordered old Itching Foot. He was rewarded by a wink of appreciation from Tom Powers. "Get away! There's another snake under here!"

"Oh-oh-oh!" School-teachers gathered their skirts under them, society matrons jumped to the board seats, Mr. Pigott jerked his dangling legs back into the wagon box.

When Eloise Pigott and Tom Powers were a hundred yards away—out of earshot if they wished not to hear—Itching Foot Davis crawled from under the wagon. In his hands he held a seven-foot rattlesnake which he offered for inspection. The snake had been dead since Mateo Oretez clubbed it that morning, but Itching Foot made its tail wiggle in a convincing manner.

"Eloise!" shouted Mr. Pigott.

Itching Foot turned on him in disgust. "Don't call the girl back to her death," he ordered. "We're in a nest of the deadly diamond rattler; there're probably a lot of them right close. We'll move a hundred rods down the road and the youngsters can meet us there. This snake, you see by counting the rattles, is eleven years old. Old enough to have great-great-grandchildren by the hundreds. All right, Sandy, go ahead. We'll find some more of the barrel cactus farther on."

The procession was almost a half mile down the road before Sandy McAllister stopped the tractor. Then he came hurrying back to Itching Foot and spoke excitedly. "What's the matter with your feet?" he demanded. "Look there!" He pointed up the mountain-bounded valley. "You've run us into a norther without giving us warning. Those wonderful chilblains of yours!"

"Criminy! Lookit it come!" Itching Foot, too, was excited. That yellow cloud of sand and dust racing toward them meant immediate and grave danger. When it struck it would wipe out trails and roads, envelope all landmarks in a thick yellow cloud, drive huge rifts of sand ahead of it, shifting and treacherous. Worse than that, it would blind the eyes, exhaust the body which strove to fight it. The journey of five miles to the Terrapin Ranch had suddenly become anything but child's play.

"Turn your backs to the north, folks!" the desert man shouted. "Hold tight! Sandy, drive that tractor with all the speed God Almighty will let you. Get these softies to the Terrapin. It's five miles and Liberty's six behind us. You can't go back for those two damned kids, or you'll never get there. I'll find 'em. If we're not in by morning, come out after us if you can. Go, Sandy, hellity-larrup!"

The tractor roared, the wagons jerked and started. For a moment there seemed to be a sucking of air, a breathless vacuum. Then the sand storm struck. A yellow wall shut off the desert; creosote bushes and encelia swayed flat before the rush of wind; great rifts piled around and over them. Like thousands of hot needles the flying sand stung the flesh, blinded the eyes. With his head shielded behind his hunched-up shoulders Sandy McAllister drove the tractor and its trailing passenger wagons eastward toward the Terrapin Ranch. Twenty yards down the rapidly drifting road he turned to look for Itching Foot. But the huge, powerful figure of the old-timer had already disappeared in the yellow murkiness. "God help them!" muttered Sandy, but the wind whipped the words from his lips and he set his teeth on grit.

VI.

Dusk settled over the low, freight-train-like Terrapin ranch house, a weird, yellow, blanketing dusk. The wind shrieked around the corners of the rambling building; driven sand rasped against the sideboards. Out in the corral the single acacia tree had been uprooted and behind its meager shelter the Terrapin horses stood heads down, shivering from fear. The sense-deadening roar of the storm was punctuated by occasional thumps as chimney bricks fell on the ranch-house roof; the structure seemed to sway from the force of the ever-increasing blasts.

Leslie Pigott stood at the western window of the long living room, his bulging eyes staring out into the impenetrable yellow atmosphere. His face was redder than ever, his eyes swollen, his jaw set. Beside him, clinging to his shoulder, was little black-eyed Mrs. Pigott. They said nothing, but as the moments passed they crowded closer to each other.

Scattered through the dust-filled living and dining rooms, where all things loomed out of perspective in the strange atmosphere, were the members of the tourist party which had left Coyote Crossing in such adventuresome spirits that morning. A sorry-looking outfit they were, dirty faced, disheveled, frightened. Sandy McAllister, guided more by instinct than reason, had driven them to safety. But that two-hour fight with the sand-swept desert was one they would never forget. For the time they were too frightened and too exhausted to speak; they huddled close to each other like the shaking horses in the corral outside.

Among the tenderfeet passed Peter Kieth, owner of the ranch and host of the party. In a feeble way he tried to comfort them, hearten them. But his words carried little conviction; he, too was mortally afraid. In his twelve years on the desert he had never known such a storm as this one but in those same twelve years he had known of many men wandering to terrible deaths in lesser storms. Three days the "northers" generally lasted—three terrible days of helplessness. How could his encouraging words ring true when his mind was picturing Tom Powers, Eloise Pigott and old Itching Foot Davis fighting an almost hopeless fight against wind and sand, hunger and thirst? Yet, "Trust Itching Foot!" he repeated to his guests. "Say, that man knows the desert like you and I know our alphabet. This storm—Lord, Itching Foot will love to fight it! He'll find the two young people and bring them in, don't worry." Again there flashed through his mind a picture of old

Itching Foot, pink bald head down, arms bent, fists clenched, leaning against the force of the wind in his search for Tom Powers and Eloise Pigott.

"Why did we ever come?" mourned Mrs. Pigott. "Oh, why, why?"

"Sh-h, dear," soothed her husband. "They'll be all right. Mr. Davis will——"

As though he had heard himself called Itching Foot Davis flung open the outer door and stumbled into the room. He staggered a step or two, then caught the red-tiled mantel for support. A caricature of the easy-going, confident man of the morning he was. His little blue eyes seemed to have become as red as live coals, his lips were swollen and blood blackened the corners of them. A mask of sand had caked over his face, making it hideously yellow, streaked where smarting tears had streamed down. His great shoulders sagged wearily, his clothes were half torn from his body. He tried to smile, then moistened his cracked lips with his tongue. His voice, when it came, sounded sand choked.

"They're all right," he said. "Right now they are. I put 'em behind a mesquite thicket. Didn't dare bring 'em with me because—well, I almost didn't get here myself. Now I've got to take some water back to 'em, and food. We're in for a fierce blow—one of the regular three-day affairs. Will you get things ready, Kieth?"

Peter Kieth strode across the room, threw an arm affectionately across Itching Foot's shoulders, and offered him a cup of water. "You can't go back now, old-timer," he said. "I'll have Ramon Chico and Steve Saari saddle up and the three of us will go after the youngsters. Where are they?"

"Saddle up!" scoffed Itching Foot, wiping the sand from his lips. "Say, if you have a bronc that'll face that hell on wings out there I'll trade the Liberty House for him. No, sir. It ain't a job a horse will do. You couldn't drive a horse into it; couldn't budge him from the corral; couldn't get his head in the air. It's a man's job and I reckon I'm the man. I sent the kids out and I'll bring 'em back. Eh, Kieth?'"

"But you can't make it, man. You're all in. I'll go myself."

"You? Criminy, Peter Kieth, with all due respect, you'd have as much chance of finding 'em on a night like this as a blind New York beggar. I'm all right. Look at me." Itching Foot's head was up again, his shoulders squared. "Give me a couple of cups of strong coffee and I'll feel fine. Sure I will. Then a couple of canteens and some gherky and tea and I'll go back to my lost babes."

Leslie Pigott had been trying to edge into the conversation. Now he had his say, a brief one. "I'm going with you," he said. "Must find Eloise."

"Now listen to that!" challenged Itching Foot. "Another life-saver! Mr. Pigott, the devil take your brave heart, you'd last about eighty rods' worth of that sand. Say, half the time you don't know out there whether you're walking on ground or air; they're 'most the same. No, there's only one man alive I'd chance having with me to-night and he's dead. That's Judge Powers, father of that lad out there. Say, back in 'ninety-two the judge and I came across from Cactus Springs in—— But I mustn't start gossiping. The kids'll be missing me. Now don't you worry, Mr. Pigott. That Tom Powers will take care of your daughter till I get back to them. He's a regular man. Lord, he wanted to carry her on his back the five miles to this ranch and he could blamed near have done it. Blamed near. No, no, Kieth! I won't go at all if you think you're coming. What's the use of risking another life? Eh? Now give me that canteen and food! Give me that—— There, that's right. Now we'll be all right out there, me and Powers and the girl until the wind quits. We'll dig in somewhere for a couple of days unless there's a let-up of this damned tornado. So long, folks! Take it easy. See you later."

With a wave of his large hand Itching Foot Davis strode out onto the swirling desert from which he had so lately staggered.

All night the wind roared and shrilled with unabated violence. The Terrapin ranch house seemed a rock in a buffeting sea, a rock which shook from violent blows. Lamps on the tables failed to light the dust-laden atmosphere of the large square rooms. Chairs, the battered piano in the corner of the living room, the old oak sideboard seemed to lose perspective, to loom large and unreal, to advance and retreat as the lamp wicks flickered.

There was little sleep for the "dudes." The alkali dust irritated their throats and eyes. They coughed, they wept, thev muttered. Probably some of them prayed when some particularly violent blast threatened to lift the rambling ranch house from its foundations. Toward morning the adventurers curled in complaining huddles, well covering the floors of the downstairs rooms. At dawn most of them were sleeping fitfully.

Only Leslie Pigott, Mrs. Pigott and Peter Kieth did not sleep; only they witnessed the arrival of Tom Powers.

The big blond youth flung open the outside door and staggered into the living room much as Itching Foot Davis had done the previous afternoon. Like Itching Foot he reeled and leaned against the red mantel for support. On his back was Eloise Pigott; her arms encircled his neck and he held them with his hands. For a moment there was silence in the gray room. Then Mr. Pigott ran forward and caught his daughter; his wife began to sob uncontrollably; Peter Kieth shouted an inane, "Hello!"

Tom Powers smiled; rather his dust-caked face seemed to crack open above the chin. His tongue touched his black lips cautiously, then again, again. He cleared his throat and as if he were pushing the words from a wooden body he shouted, "Here's Eloise!"

"Let her go!" cried the girl's father, tugging frantically at her limp body. "Let her go!"

"I—I can't. My hands seem fastened."

Peter Kieth caught the boy's fingers; it took all his strength to unclench them. The little figure of Eloise Pigott dropped into her father's arms.

Release from the weight he had carried for torturing miles seemed to unbalance the body of Tom Powers. "I'm going right up—up in the air!" he shouted. "Look out"—as if he must warn some one to dodge—"up—up!"

Instead he sat heavily on the floor. There he swayed a moment from his hips, back and forth, then sidewise. His body described a wider arc at last and he sprawled on his face.

Brandy and water brought Tom Powers halfway back to consciousness in ten minutes; hearty shaking by Peter Kieth did the rest. Eloise Pigott was already sobbing in happy chorus with her mother, and Leslie Pigott was bending thankfully and solicitously over both.

"Where's Itching Foot?" demanded the ranch owner as Powers' red eyes blinked open.

"Who?"—dazedly.

"Itching Foot. Old Itching Foot Davis?"

"Dunno"—carelessly, and the bleared eyes closed. More vigorous shaking by Kieth and the constant pounding of the question, "Where's Itching Foot?" at last brought a sullen reply, as from a punished schoolboy. "He told me to wait. I waited eight hours in that hell. Isn't that enough? Go 'way, I tell you."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Peter Kieth. "He's still looking for you! He'll look till he drops, from one mesquite thicket to another, till he drops. Till he drops, I say. And two more days of this!" He turned toward the north window against which the sand storm pounded and roared. "Damn you! Damn you!" His lean brown face was taut; he clenched his fists and shook them at the wind. In his mind was again the vision of hardy old Itching Foot staggering through the drifting sands; of him lifting one foot painfully ahead of the other; of the final stagger and fall, and yellow-white sand blowing over the great rugged body. All these things he saw, but all he could do was to shake his fists futilely at the wind and say again and again, "Damn! Damn!"

VII.

Between two of the desert's regularly spaced creosote bushes was a pair of shoes, half filled with sand. They were large shoes, too large to belong to any one but Itching Foot Davis. Fifty yards ahead the dying wind flicked the tatters of a blue denim shirt from a cholla cactus where it had caught. A half mile toward the eastern mountains a pair of gray socks were half covered by sand, and northward again the breeze ballooned and somersaulted a pair of huge khaki trousers. The wind seemed playful now, gentle and merry after sixty hours of passion.

Mute evidence the clothes were. Peter Kieth knew what they meant; he had expected to find them from the moment he had found the two overturned canteens a mile back. Now he faced Sandy McAllister whose little pinto was having trouble keeping abreast of Kieth's Queenie. "Men always go like that," he said. He was still angry at the elements, but there was a sorrowing deadness to his voice. "As soon as the thirst gets them, off go their clothes;

then they pitch forward in the sands. Maybe they think they are swimming or——"

"Aw, shut up!" ordered Sandy. "Tell me something I don't know." Neither man noticed the impertinence. They rode forward, their eyes searching each clump of bush, studying each hump of sand. The only sound for several minutes was the suck of horses' hoofs in sand and the occasional metallic click of loose rock. Then, "Tell me something I don't know," repeated Sandy. "Why, why I can actually see old Itching Foot tearing off his shirt, kicking off his shoes; I can see his head wiggling from side to side and I can feel the slivers in his throat and the swelling of his tongue and the aching of his lungs. He got exhausted, dropped the canteens, and then—— Shut up! Stop talking about it." Sandy was oblivious to the fact that it was he who was doing the talking.

Back and forth the two men rode, picking lanes twenty yards apart and two miles long. All morning they had been combing the desert in that fashion. Farther west Steve Saari and Ramon Chico were working; beyond them, wistful little Sid Satterwaite of Liberty and bulbous Sam Slade. Nearer the Terrapin Ranch and circling outward were the Terrapin vaqueros and almost the entire population of Liberty; patriots seeking their lost leader they were, children, almost, trying to find their common father.

"Shall we go back to the chuck wagon?" asked Kieth when the desert sun was directly overhead, burning and near. "Queenie needs water and so do I."

"Let's try that mesquite thicket over there first," suggested Sandy, pointing to a sprawling sand-filled cluster of green to the west. "He'd probably try to look there, maybe; I mean it might have been in his mind yet about putting the kids behind the mesquite and he might try to find—— Oh, hell! Let's go!" He dug his heels into the little pinto's ribs and raced toward the misnamed thicket. Suddenly ahead of them a lone red-topped buzzard skidded along the ground and took off awkwardly. The men muttered separate oaths.

There they found Itching Foot Davis. He was warped grotesquely on the sand, his round face staring upward. It was very red and raw, that huge face; it seemed to have no eyes and from the gaping mouth protruded a tongue, an inhuman black-and-yellow tongue. One hand was clutching at the throat; the fingers were wide apart and curled like talons. The other huge arm was thrown back above the head and the legs were doubled at the knees.

At the sight of that sprawling, dust-covered figure Peter Kieth and Sandy McAllister slid their horses to a stiff-legged stop, threw the reins forward and vaulted to the ground. Sandy's quick eyes judged the situation first. "He's alive yet. See, the buzzard hasn't been nearer than twenty feet. It's been waiting since dawn; I wondered why we hadn't seen it wheeling against the sky and—— Come on, quick! Water in that canteen cap and a little brandy. We've got to fool that devil bird, waiting, waiting—— Listen, Mr. Kieth, you ride hell bent for the chuck wagon. Bring it up here. I'll stretch a saddle blanket over a couple prongs of mesquite to shade him and—— Go ahead, and stir the dust!"

Queenie was already wheeled on her sturdy haunches and Peter Kieth, hunched low over her neck, was guiding the vaulting race over greasewood and sage to the chuck wagon, two miles away on the Terrapin road. At the edge of the mesquite thicket Sandy McAllister weighted one end of his tattered gray blanket with loose rocks, stretched it over the limp form of Itching Foot Davis and supported the outer edge with two gnarled lengths of the mesquite root. Then carefully, tenderly as a mother, he dropped water into Itching Foot's open mouth, bathed his puffed red face, chafed his huge hands and wrists. As he worked he winked rapidly; someway tears kept coming to his eyes. "Damn the alkali dust!" he said. And under his breath he kept muttering, "Poor old devil, poor old devil." It became a sort of pleading croon: "Poor old devil," with the unspoken prayer, "Don't die! Don't die!"

Thirty minutes later, when the Terrapin chuck wagon came hurtling and rattling over rocks and brush behind two rangy piebald mares, Itching Foot was stirring slightly. His breathing was audible; his huge, hairy chest rose and sank in long-drawn sighs.

"Sure, he's coming around all right," Sandy answered the question in Peter Kieth's eyes. Tears were running unheeded down his tough thin cheeks now; he couldn't tell why. Characteristically, he began to swear. "Why in superdamnation did you bring the whole country?" he demanded, including Tom Powers, who was riding a long-haired desert pony, and the three figures on the wagon seat in his accusing glare. "The girl and her father, too. Hell's bells! we'll have to throw something over old Itching Foot now. It ain't decent. Why in blazes did you have to bring——"

"Please, Mr. McAllister, we had to come." It was Eloise Pigott who answered. Her eyes were big and wondering, her lips parted in anxiety. "You know it was for us——"

"Sure, sure!" rasped Sandy. "Just stay where you are a minute and leave us alone."

In from the west galloped Steve Saari and Ramon Chico, attracted first by the wheeling buzzard and then by the charging chuck wagon. Close behind them were bulbous Sam Slade, red-faced and wet, and anxious-eyed little Sid Satterwaite, thin gray hair flying.

"Stand back, all of you!" shrilled Sandy McAllister. *"Zape!* Give him a little air. What do you think he is, a side show?" He leaned over the twitching figure of the old hotel proprietor and resumed his ministrations with water and brandy. The puffy folds of flesh over the sufferer's eyes twitched and were forced apart until a knife edge of gleaming pupil showed.

"The two kids?" Itching Foot pushed the words from his throat.

"Fine! All right!" declared Sandy and the folds of raw flesh descended over the gleaming eyes again. "You're all right, too, old timer," Sandy enthused. "Sure you are!"

Once more the slits of eyes opened. "I'm going to die," whispered Itching Foot. The words came a little easier now; he was beginning to feel his tongue.

"Going to die?" repeated Sandy in wonderment. "Say, you're too damned tough to——" He checked himself suddenly. He had seen something in those blazing eyes which silenced him. Slowly old Itching Foot moved one arm toward Sandy, nudged it into him.

"I'm going to die," repeated Itching Foot faintly, but his eyes gleamed in command. "Tell 'em I'm dying."

"Tell 'em you're——"

"Dying," commanded Itching Foot intensely.

"Sure," agreed Sandy, "if that's what you want."

"First give me a swig of brandy," ordered the old man. "Then go tell 'em I'm checking in." His words were thick and wooden but his determination was evident. "Have Mr. Pigott come here."

Bewildered, but obeying Itching Foot as people naturally obeyed him, Sandy strode to the anxious watchers grouped around the chuck wagon. "He's dying," he said. The words came uncertainly; apparently Sandy was taking it hard. "Mr. Pigott, he wants to see you alone."

For several minutes Leslie Pigott stood beside the sighing form of Itching Foot Davis. The manufacturer's red face was redder than ever, his bulging eyes shone behind the thick glasses. "Mr. Davis," he said at last, "I'm here. Is there anything I can do?"

Itching Foot groaned. After a moment he spoke laboriously. "Miss Eloise?" he said.

"She's all right, Mr. Davis."

"Who saved her?"

"Why—why, that Powers fellow." Obviously the thought was distasteful to Mr. Pigott.

"Good old Tom Powers," murmured Itching Foot. He turned half over so the knife edge of his eyes gleamed toward Mr. Pigott. One huge raw hand reached upward and the manufacturer took it in his. "Mr. Pigott, I can tell by your looks that you're a fair man." Itching Foot was rushing his words, as if they were on his dying breath. "That girl, Miss Eloise, isn't yours any more. She belongs to Tom Powers. He saved her life; it belongs to him. Doesn't it seem that way to you?"—anxiously.

"But I won't have him marry her if that's what you mean. He's not good enough."

"Don't say it," pleaded Itching Foot, clutching tighter to Mr. Pigott's hand. "Don't! It isn't true! There isn't a finer man in the—— Why, I knew his dad before him and they're alike as two peas. Big, four-square men. Let him have the girl, Mr. Pigott, and you'll not be sorry."

Leslie Pigott shook his head. Not for nothing had he a square jaw and steady eyes. "No, I'm sorry," he said. "But Eloise will marry a man with position, wealth and——"

"Bosh!" exploded Itching Foot with more strength than one could have expected from his weakened condition. Then wearily he dropped his arm to the sand, closed his eyes and turned away. Leslie Pigott stood silently, ashamed, he scarcely knew why. For several minutes the droning of bees in the flaring yellow encelia blooms and the nervous twittering of a disturbed cactus wren were the only sounds. In the background the cluster of people around the chuck wagon watched anxiously.

Again Itching Foot Davis stirred. "Mr. Pigott," he whispered, "I'm dying. You heard Sandy say so, and Sandy ought to know. It's all right, my dying, you know. But I'm not happy to go; not right now. I lost my life looking for your daughter and young Powers. That's right, isn't it? And maybe that makes me think I ought to be given some consideration. If I'm wrong tell me so, Mr. Pigott." The manufacturer was silent. Itching Foot gasped and shivered. "Will you pour a little more water into my throat, Mr. Pigott? There, that's better. It'll make my going easier. Listen, man, I'm only an old desert rat; I'm checking in after a worthless life. So I'm not entitled to any consideration, am I?"

"Why—why, you ought to have anything you want," blurted red-faced Leslie Pigott. "Course you ought. You gave your life for my daughter and I'll see that you get anything you want. Course I will."

Itching Foot sighed mightily, then forced his eyes well open. "You're very good, Mr. Pigott," he said. "Will you prop me up now? Use those blankets there. Fine. Now call Miss Eloise and Tom Powers over, and Mr. Kieth and Sandy."

"What are you going to do?" asked Leslie Pigott suspiciously.

"Do?" repeated Itching Foot. "Why marry Eloise and Tom, of course. I'm a justice of the peace and——"

"Never!" roared Mr. Pigott.

As if surprise had stricken him, Itching Foot Davis swayed for a moment then pitched face foremost in the sand. Leslie Pigott jumped forward, picked him up and tried to prop him, but Itching Foot drooped limply.

"Bring Tom and Eloise quick!" he gasped, falling back on his blankets.

Leslie Pigott was stampeded for probably the first time in his life. He could fight rival concerns, striking laboring men, unfair competition, freight rates, but he couldn't fight a wilted, dying man who asked just one thing to make him happy. "Eloise!" he called. "Powers! Come here quickly!"

As if anticipating his cry, the entire group rushed forward from the chuck wagon and gathered around Itching Foot. The old hotel proprietor had opened his eyes again, wider than ever, and there was a queer gleam in them.

There, on the straggly border of a mesquite thicket, the marriage ceremony was performed; performed by a huge, swollen-faced man lying under a tented blanket on the sand, a single tuft of gray hair rising from his burned-red bald head and his body wrapped in blankets. Standing side by side Eloise Pigott and Tom Powers faced him; the little, charming bride with parted lips and black eyes in which wonder and joy struggled for dominance; the big, yellow-haired groom, slightly sheepish, wholly happy.

An odd wedding it was: The worn license brought from Tom Powers' inside pocket; the laborious questions of the domineering old man lying in the sand; the quick, eager responses of the girl and her lover; the surprised assent of Leslie Pigott; the solemn wonderment of the audience. Beautiful it was, too; a ceremony at Nature's altar. The gleaming, purple-red sides of the mountains as background; the deep-green mesquite as altar; flaming-red cacti blooms, purple lupins and dazzling yellow encelia blossoms for altar decorations; the clear, delicate notes of a lone cactus wren for music.

"Man and wife!" sounded the voice of Itching Foot Davis. Odd how his voice had gained in strength and resonance as he proceeded through the familiar ceremony; odd, too, how quickly he raised his arms to receive the bride and bestow the ministerial kiss; oddest, perhaps, how his swollen face dropped its mask of fatigue and wrinkled into smiles, and with what strength he reached out and gripped the hand of Tom Powers.

One after another the witnesses insisted on signing the marriage license: Grinning, freckle-faced Sandy McAllister; dour Peter Kieth; Pete Saari, the swarthy, Mongolian-faced Finn who had to put a cross for his name; good-natured Sam Slade who relished the morsel he had to take home and tell Mrs. Slade; Sid Satterwaite, who looked at the world from wistful eyes suddenly grown younger; Ramon Chico, the volatile, merry-making Mexican.

Then, "Carry me to the wagon," boomed the voice of Itching Foot with almost its old-time resonance. "We'll have a wedding procession."

They made a cradle of their arms for him, Sandy McAllister and Peter Kieth at his shoulders, Sam Slade and Sid Satterwaite at his broad hips. "I didn't all dry up, did I, Sandy?" Itching Foot bantered as the men grunted over their burden. Then he drew his puffy face into a solemn wink. "I may have been three fourths dead," he whispered to Sandy, "but I pretended the other fourth. Damme, Sandy! I should have been an actor."

The chuck wagon was driven slowly back to the Terrapin Ranch. Around it rode the cowboys and the rejoicing Libertians. Sprawled in the wagon box was old Itching Foot Davis, one hand holding the big fist of Tom Powers, the other clinging to little Eloise Pigott Powers. Every time the new husband glanced with wondering love at his bride Itching Foot seemed to intercept the emotion and squeezed the hand of each. Then he grinned mockingly at the broad back of Leslie Pigott, who sat stiffly on the wagon seat beside Peter Kieth. Papa seemed still stupefied; or perhaps he was thinking what he could tell his wife.

As it turned out, he didn't need to tell her anything. When the procession turned into the ranch-house inclosure Itching Foot raised his huge round beet-red face over the sideboards. "Hail to the bride and groom!" he bawled. "Bride and groom!" he repeated. "Mr. and Mrs. Tom Powers, God bless 'em!"

Mrs. Pigott proved herself a good sport. She kissed her daughter, kissed Tom Powers, and ended by kissing the bewildered face of her husband. "It's all right, Leslie," she said. "Now go in and pack while I fuss over these children and learn how it happened."

Soon after dawn the next morning there was a great stir at the Terrapin ranch house. The tourists were getting ready to leave. Three days on the desert had provided them with enough thrills to last them a lifetime. They had had plenty, too much. Indians, which as far as they knew were real; rustler-hanging, snakes, just as the advertisement of the Lightning Promoters, Inc., had promised them; with a terrible sand storm thrown in for good measure. Now the old railway coach on the Coyote Crossing sidetrack seemed as attractive as any place on earth.

By ten o'clock the wagons were ready behind the tractor. School-teachers, matrons and their sheeplike consorts piled aboard. In the back wagon the two chinless wonders gazed sorrowfully at their bullet-punctured trunks. The other tourists were watching the northern horizon apprehensively, fearing another sand storm. On the tractor seat Sandy McAllister grinned happily; the engine roared; the wagons jolted and jerked forward.

"So long, folks!" roared Itching Foot Davis. He was sitting on the porch of the ranch house, his feet immersed in a pail of cold water. Beside him on the floor was a broad white board and a can of black paint. "So long!" he waved a huge hand. "Good luck!" His little pale-blue eyes danced merrily in the folds of his face as he watched the strange procession turn on the road toward the railway. He splashed his feet mightily in the water, then reached down for the board and paint. For a half hour he was deeply busy. Then he called.

"Peter! Heh, Peter Kieth! Come here and see what I've done for you!" The owner of the Terrapin Ranch appeared in the doorway. "It's to be nailed on the post below your mail box, down by the main road," Itching Foot explained, holding his sign aloft. "Right below where it says, 'Terrapin Ranch.'" He looked pleadingly at Owner Kieth, much as a child expecting commendation. Kieth grinned and read the black-painted words aloud.

"'NOT A DUDE RANCH'—you're right, Itching Foot. We'll nail it up exactly as you say."

"If I had room on the board," Itching Foot explained seriously, "I'd add, 'But a damned good place for honeymoons.' Look out there, will you?"

He pointed to the corral, where Tom Powers and Eloise were trying to release each other's hands long enough to saddle a couple of horses. "A damned good place for honeymoons," Itching Foot repeated. He emphasized each syllable of his slogan by splashing his feet in the water.

More stories by Mr. Marsh in future issues.

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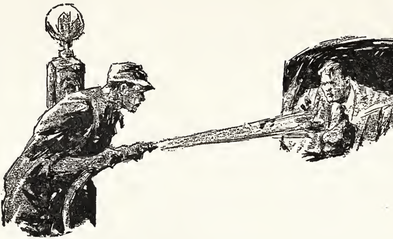

Old King's Coal

By C. S. Montanye

Author of "Old Father Hubbard," "Tips that Pass in the Night," Etc.

Ottie Scandrel jumps from the ladder of success and falls on the escalator of fortune.

ACCORDING to Marcus Borealis, younger brother of Aurora, one of the literati who roamed about Rome a year or so before the Eagles became sea gulls, "Twice blest is he who can forever retain what is his own." Marcus might have been a shark or a bust as the Shakespeare of his day but upon that one remark alone he deserves everlasting credit and a prominent place in the textbooks. It's a fact that any bim who has nerve and gets a lucky break can collect the sugar, but it takes one who is smarter than smart to hang onto it once he's leveled off and has it.

I'm right, am I not?

In this age of dashing yachtsmen who make frequent trips to the West Indies on business, yeggs, eggs, race tracks, bobbed-hair bandits, to say nothing of all the strangers from out of town who take Broadway and make themselves eligible for doing time by lifting watches, head waiters, waiters with no heads, the tin-can pirates with crooked meters, chorus girls, cloakroom burglars and—finish it yourself—any one who can retain what good fortune, gray matter or Mistress Luck has bequeathed him deserves all the medals. Shylock, himself, would have been looking for space on the bread line had he ever dropped off at the port of New York to stretch at the tall buildings.

This zippy narrative hasn't a thing in the world to do with Shylock although it does concern a certain blockhead who undoubtedly traces directly back to the famous money lender. The name, as you probably suspect, reads Ottie Scandrel.

Friend Ottie, a Manhattan hick who'd believe that Adam smashed baggage in the Garden of Eden if you looked him in the eye when you told him so, was one of the kind the Borealis boy must have been thinking about when he dipped his fountain pen in the ink to pen his wise crack. Scandrel, with more ups and downs than a second-hand roadster on a tough detour, had knocked out an eye-widening fortune aided and abetted by luck and pluck, had clowned around on the dough, loafing like bread until the Stock Exchange shook him like a cocktail, cleaned him like a carpet and dried him like a bath towel before removing his last nickel and showing him the nearest exit.

It was pence to shillings that any one else slapped over the jumps in this manner would have called it a day and gotten a job as a bookkeeper or a bootlegger but not so with the former pride of the Broadway farm. Ottie had staged a comeback by a climb into the prize ring and, riding in on the long end of the purse, had copped a piece of important money. Right here is where the sense of Marcus gets in its fine work with the cents of Scandrel and proves without a doubt that what was good a few centuries ago can get across to-day without difficulty.

Just for fun let me tell you about it.

Scandrel with a fresh bankroll turned overnight into the well-dressed boulevardier he had been before the bulls and the bears had given him the crash. He began dining three times a day, ate between meals, bought another car whose wheels were all present and then began running up to my gym in the Bronx to snicker at the tomato-catchup sockers who were working their heads and hands off around the premises in order to get edged for some notorious prelim that was to start them off on the road to fame. Ottie had a laugh for the lightweights, the welters and the top heavies, a giggle for all his old pals and a sneer for Looie Pitz, the little fight manager, who, like the brook, went on forever.

Pitz and Ottie were always as friendly as a couple of Airedales in a strange kennel but for once Looie had the bulge on him. Somewhere in the great wide world the little Scandinavian had dug up a two-fisted welterweight who was the real case goods. The puncher answered to the name of "Right Hook" Lane and made the same kind of an impression on the Manhattan fight fans as a "Follies" queen would on a hick village. Pitz's boy had everything including a disposition like a tormented hornet and a love for taking and giving it. He fought in the ring, in his dressing room, in the street, up alleys and on corners and he fought his way up the ladder like an Irish bricklayer working with a half dozen Italians. It looked like the welter crown sure, and Pitz, who had formerly traded in nothing but champion floppers, was so tickled that he bought himself a silk dicer and two clean shirts.

Really, Right Hook Lane had the stuff that would make a butterfly talk back to a vulture!

Every one around the Bronnix gym thought so too except Ottie who rolled up a couple of days after he first began spending real jack again to look things over and cast an optic at Lane, who was tearing up a couple of his sparring partners and getting a lot of amusement out of it.

"It looks as if Pitz had struck gold at last, don't it?" I said when the second frame began with Lane steaming up his wallops.

Ottie glanced carelessly up at the slugfest and curled an immediate lip.

"Yeah? You think so, so I'm taking an opposite stand. Sure, this is a fast job, but I had a look at his record in the paper the other night and who did he ever fight except old men, nearly-wases, never-wases and other guys who think gloves are something you wear when you go to a wedding. Match him up with a first-rater and you'll see Looie going back to that funny derby hat he used to wear. A laugh, positively."

As he finished speaking Pitz saw us and came over, dragging down his cuffs to prove they were clean.

"I guess I ain't got it now?" he chuckled, waving a finger at the fast-moving Mr. Lane. "Look at that boy sock! Look at his footwork! Look at the way he crosses that left, and don't overlook that wonderful right of his! He's there, I'm telling you!"

"But do I believe you?" Ottie yawned. "Where did you pick up this tramp?"

Pitz licked his lips.

"Out in Pennsylvania—fighting around the coal mines for nothing and enjoying every minute of it. He's a natural or I can find comfort in a telephone booth. He's going right up until he sits pretty on the throne. Sweet, no?"

Scandrel nudged me.

"Get every word of this, Joe. Looie thinks he's out before a circus. You poor fish," he hissed at the optimistic manager, "I was just telling O'Grady here that your world beater ain't hardly anything at all. If I had time I'd step up there now and drop him like a cut-rate sale in a drug store. Sitting pretty on the throne, hey? That means somebody's going to crown him. Get away with that stuff. I could go out now and find any number of boys who, with a week or two of work, could put him to bed like flowers."

One glance at Looie Pitz was sufficient to show that he was being singed.

"Come on now, you two!" I cut in hastily. "If you want to fight join the police force or get married. Don't mind him, Looie. He's taking you out for a gallop. Er—what did you want to see me about?" I asked Scandrel.

He consulted his notes, fingered one of his ruined ears and coughed.

"That's right, Joe. I come all the way up here for a piece of talk with you. If you've got a couple of minutes that are running to waste can I see you in your private office?"

"Go in and lock the safe first!" Pitz advised.

"I'll lock you perfectly safe!" Scandrel hollered. "You've got too much to say for your size. Don't forget you're handling Right Hook Lane—not Benny Leonard. Take a walk for yourself or I'll knock the top of your nut off!"

Before he could carry out the threat or promise Lane had punched his luckless sparring partner out of the ring and in the excitement I managed to get Ottie away. In the office I closed and locked the door while he dropped comfortably into a chair, put his new shoes on the edge of the desk, buttoned his new waistcoat, hung up his new tile and inhaled the fragrance of the silk kerchief that went with his balloon trousers and seven-dollar cravat.

"That guy Pitz!" he mumbled. "He's a human felony I'd like to take for plenty. If that silly smacker of his is the future champ the Prince of Wales can ride horses. Honest——"

"Is that what you came up here to see me about?" I interrupted.

He wiped off his chin, wound his new wrist watch and sighed.

"To be truthful—no. Listen, Joe. Now I got a wad again I'm looking around for a good investment. I want to buy in on a graft that earns as much as rum running, pays profits like the ladies' clothing business, is as safe as a political pull and as interesting as musical comedy. I might be wrong but I think I've found my future profession."

"What is it—pocket picking?"

Ottie coughed again.

"Your comedy's rotten, Joe. No, it ain't pocket picking any more than law is medicine. Leave me tell you about it. The other day when I went to shop for a new bus I got a steer over to the Night-and-Day Garage which is nearer the East River than it is to Times Square. I didn't pick up a bargain there for the reason that the head of the works can't tell the difference between a new car and a used car when it comes to prices. The name of this party is Jerry King and he told me he's thinking of selling out on account of the tough hours and having to watch out that nobody gives him the oil to steal his gas. He says that it's a bargain for any one looking for a nifty investment and while I only had a sneer for the proposition I've been thinking it over ever since. It's a cinch that nobody could steal gas off me——"

"Why should they steal it when you give it to them for nothing?" I cut in.

"Well, to lay a long story with a punch in the eye, I'm set now to talk money with this King baby. Give me an hour out of your life and we'll run down and look the works over. I'll pass you in as an expert so he won't try to gyp me and we'll see which is what. Correct?"

My answer was such that two o'clock the same afternoon found us delving into a neighborhood somewhere between the Battery and Harlem where nobody's life was safe after twilight.

Future presidents and gunmen played in the gutters, in the middle of the street and on the slippery sidewalks. Somebody's wash was drying on a hundred fire escapes and peddlers with pushcarts that sold everything from suspicious herring to fur coats bargained along the way. We had to push a path through a couple of gang fights, cross two avenues and turn down another side street before we reached our destination.

The Night-and-Day Garage was located in a three-story edifice and was all wet. Two open touring cars that had given up the struggle had died at the front door, a couple of taxies with yellow fever lay in ruins back of them and a couple of sportive car washers with an equal number of hoses responsible for the general dampness were spraying a limousine that looked as if it might have given Noah a joy ride. For the rest there was the perfume of grease and gas and wet rubber.

Ottie sniffed it and reached for his pipe.

"It don't smell so good," he admitted, "but neither does glue and look at all the money in it if you stick around on the job. Hey, Mac!" he bawled at one of the moist pair. "A little attention now!"

The washer swung around and handed us a stream from the hose before he was able to turn the water off at the nozzle. My boy friend chased his new skimmer, caught it before it flowed to the gutter and returning pasted the offender.

"Trying to beat Saturday night out, hey? Get under that boat and look at the axles. You, Herman," he roared at the other one. "Where's the boss?"

The second mechanic shrugged.

"Down in the cellar with the bells and the bags," he replied indifferently. "If you boys have got a bill to collect rush over and push that bell near the office door. I'd do it myself only I ain't no bell hop."

Scandrel was about to put him on the floor with his friend when a door in the rear of the place opened and Jerry King, the proprietor, walked casually in.

King was a trifle breath-taking. I expected to behold some ex-mechanic who by preying on the customers had collected enough to go in for wholesale brigandage but saw instead a well-built, handsome youth with a Harvard face, a Yale accent and a Princeton polish. King wore gray-flannel trousers, white tennis shoes and a silk shirt over which he was pulling a heavy sweater before he smoothed down his carefully parted hair and sauntered over to us with the languid grace of a matinée idol stepping out to take his fifteenth curtain call.

"Well, here we are," Ottie began. "A little wet but all together otherwise. Meet my friend, Joe O'Grady, who knows more about the garage graft than most paying tellers do about time-tables. For a fact, Joe can run a bus on a gallon of cold water and get fifty miles or more out of it. He knows as much about cars as the party who runs the subway, even if he does hang out in the Bronx. Let's go inside and talk about this and that and so and so."

The handsome and well-bred Jerry King agreed with a languid nod, smothered a yawn and led us into a small office which he unlocked with two keys. Once inside he waved us into chairs. Ottie promptly took two—one for himself and one for his feet.

"Now I know where I've seen you before," King murmured politely. "You're the prospective purchaser who was here the other day. Your face is not easily forgotten."

"Never mind my face," Ottie growled. "Who did you think I was—Mary's lamb? Listen, I'm here with my pal to talk dollars and sense. Leave us look over your books and then we'll come down to brass tacks. Right?"

King waved a weary hand at a safe that was half open.

"The books? Oh, quite naturally. Just help yourself, old top. You'll find them all there, but you'll notice that on some days there were no entries. I couldn't afford to keep a bookkeeper and I was so frightfully enervated at times I really couldn't do it myself. But do help yourself. Maybe you can understand the figures —I can't."

With his usual swagger Scandrel hauled out the ledgers and began running through them. He had no idea of what it was all about. A double entry to him meant two horses entered in a race by the same owner and for all he knew a debit was some kind of a dope fiend who used opium. Twenty minutes of close examination that told him absolutely nothing sufficed. With a knowing nod he hurled the books back in the safe, coughed and took his chair.

"Your accounts look O. K. to me, feller. Now for the most important item. What is your reason for selling out this here establishment? Be truthful. Liars to me are the same as second-story men to the flatfeet—I get them in the end. Come clean, bo."

King helped himself to a cigarette and leaned farther back in his chair.

"It's rather a long story, you know. And a bit of a fanciful yarn though perfectly true. Favor me with your attention for a few minutes and I'll try and explain matters. I think you'll be surprised."

We were.

To begin with we learned that Jerry King was no other than the only son of the millionaire coal magnate who was known to the press, pulpit and his associaes in highway robbery as "Old King." It seemed that he was one of these efficiency whales who wanted everybody on the job—except himself—every minute of the day. It also seemed that his most ardent desire was that his son and heir be a chip of the old blockhead. Jerry King frankly admitted that he had been born lazy and wasn't ashamed of it. He went on to tell how his father had taken him into the business only to throw him out when he had found him, not asleep at the switch, but doing a doze at a one-hundred-and-eighty-dollar mahogany desk.

It was a sad, sad story.

"Father," young King continued, "was simply furious when he caught me napping. It was about the fifth or sixth time so perhaps he had reason to be. He called me a shiftless waster and other unpleasant epithets. Not only was he very disagreeable but he said he was through with me until I could prove to his satisfaction that I possessed some disguised qualifications he had never been able to find. He said I was a failure and, inasmuch as he hates failures, informed me that I need not come back to the fold until I had proved to his satisfaction that I could do some one thing better than any one else could. Father don't care if it is driving a truck, cleaning the streets or manipulating an elevator. If I can excel in *something* and prove that I can earn money by my own ability, he'll be glad to bury the battle-ax, knowing I'm not quite as lazy and worthless as he believes me. So after the jolly old talk he wrote me out a check, I cashed it and purchased this garage from a gentleman who didn't like the police commissioner and didn't want to stay in the same city where he was."

"And the jolly old garage is a flop," Ottie horned in. "Well, well. So that's the way it was? You sound like a library book reads, but go right along. Tell me lots more."

Young King obliged.

It seemed that his father, following the traits of numerous rich men who had discovered that office hours interfered with golf, was about to retire and hand the business over intact, not to a little group of faithful employees but to one Adolphus McSweeney.

"McSweeney," King explained, "is a cousin of mine who lives five hundred or a thousand miles from New York."

"A distant cousin," Scandrel grinned. "What about him?"

"It's so beastly unfair," the other went on. "I haven't seen Adolphus for years, though I understand he has developed into a somewhat uncouth and low person with odd hobbies. If father does fulfill his threat my cousin will surely wreck the business. Whereas, if father handed it over to me I feel perfectly confident I could handle it successfully."

"The same way you keep books, hey?" Ottie grunted.

Jerry King flushed.

"There's a difference," he pointed out stiffly, "between doing the work yourself and having some one do it for you. The head of a vast corporation such as father's coal business has only to sign letters and checks. My chirography is splendid, if I do say so myself, and competent aids will handle all the necessary routine, leaving me merely to push buttons. This is why I'm selling out this garage. It's not my line and there's no use to continue on. You may have it for one third of my original investment."

"Fair enough," Ottie replied briskly. "Get your lawyers to draw up the papers, telephone me at the Swank Club over on Third Avenue when they're ready to be signed and I'll stop in with a certificate check to close the deal. The car business is a made-to-order fit for me. I'll collect heavy on this grift."

King promising to have everything ready for the transfer of the property before the end of the week, bowed us languidly out, Ottie as pleased as a laundress with a new washboard.

"So you think you can make a success of it?" I murmured when we reached the runway that led to the street.

"Think it?" was his answer. "I *know* it! I ain't got a college education and for all I know Mussolini is something you catch in the mud at low tide, but I'll clean on this, I positively will. Let me tell you——"

He was cut short by the appearance of a canary-colored roadster that shot in from the street and came to a panting stop, its brakes burning, its radiator boiling over and its five tires as flat as the sole of a traveling salesman's shoe.

From this colorful example of the automotive industries' art alighted a young lady who resembled a magazine advertisement that had come to life. She owned hair the same shade as the car, Broadway eyes, a Riverside Drive smile and a West End Avenue hauteur. She was as trim and twice as neat as a package of pins, as pleasing to look at as twilight across a lake and as fascinating as roulette.

While she got out and slammed the door Ottie, his eyes bulging, stepped forward and she snapped her pretty fingers twice.

"Here, my man," she ordered, "just take a wrench and find out what's the trouble with my car. Don't stand there gaping at me like a fish. I had the motor as far north as Central Park when I heard something drop and since then it hasn't been running well at all. Be quick now."

Ottie looked at me, coughed and unbuttoned his jacket so she could get a glimpse of his new platinum watch chain.

"Er—you've got me wrong, Peachy," he began with a smirk. "I ain't no more a mechanic here than you're the janitress and I couldn't tell you what ails your job if you promised on your word of honor to wed me at four o'clock. The name is Otto Scandrel. If you hail from New York or its suburbs you probably know all about me."

The girl shook her yellow head.

"I'm afraid I don't. I'm sorry I made such a dreadful mistake. But do you suppose I can have the car fixed so I can use it after the show to-night? I want to take two of my girl friends up to the Outside Inn."

"The *show?*" Ottie hollered. "So you're in the show business? I might have known it. No doll with beauty like yours is letting it go to waste. Be at ease with me. The show business is my profession also, you might say. I used to help Georgie Cohan write his songs and plays, I always give the Shubert boys tips when they build a new theayter and I pick out the 'Follies' chorus for Ziegfeld every season. That ought to make us pals on the spot. What did you say your name was?"

"Merla Nevin. I'm playing the ingénue in 'Come On Feet, Let's Go!' the new revue at the St. Jaundice. You must stop in some time."

"Try to keep me away!" Scandrel giggled. "And meet one of my pals—Joe O'Grady, on the left. When we go out on parties we'll find somebody for Joe—maybe you got an aunt whose rheumatism ain't so bad in warm weather. Joe's not much to look at but he's got a nice disposition and money flows with him like cement. Excuse me now while I go and get some one to look over your car. Don't go away. I'll be right back."

He returned with all the employees of the place armed with everything from nail files to sledge hammers. By cuffing a few and bawling out the others he got them all to the yellow roadster and snapped up the hood.

"Now—*go!*"

With joyous shouts the bunch rushed forward and began tearing the engine apart. While they threw half of it away Ottie and Miss Nevin held animated conversation.

"You know," the good-looking blonde confessed, "I begin to think I was rooked when I bought that car. I paid twelve hundred—or almost half a week's salary for it—and I've had nothing but trouble from the day I first owned it. It's yellow in more ways than its paint. I hate it, I hate it!"

"After a while I'll go over and kick it for you!" Ottie said. "Why don't you sell it? A snapper like you needs pearls hung around her neck, not a wreck like that. You know it—so do I."

Merla Nevin smiled grimly.

"*Sell* it? Who'd buy themselves trouble?" She gave Ottie a sharp look, laughed a little and continued. "You know it isn't really such a bad car after all. The upholstery is lovely and when the wind shield is clean you can see right through it. Would—would you be interested in buying it from me for nine hundred dollars?"

This was Ottie's cue to snicker out loud.

"No, baby. There are limits to even friendship and admiration. But I'll tell you what I will do, Merla—yes, I'm calling you that because I can see we're due to be regular pals. I'm practically set to snap this sink up outright and once I do I'll advertise the can and wish it off on the first person who comes in here with a loose fifty megs. Right? I'll see you back to Broadway in a taxi—if you don't mind and have your pocketbook with you. This neighborhood is so tough that they boil nails here instead of cabbage."

The girl looked in my direction.

"But is Mr. McShady coming too?"

He made a careless gesture.

"Stay around and see that these tramps don't lay down on the job, Joe. The boss mechanic tells me that with any kind of luck that calliope will be running like a phonograph within a week and a half. So long—see you Tuesday."

Some two weeks or fourteen days later Ottie became the proprietor of the Night-and-Day Garage and on the afternoon after that the weary Mr. Jerry King called around to remove the last of his personal belongings. These, as he explained, were behind lock and key in the cellar.

"The nose paint, hey?" Ottie questioned, all attention. "I'm sorry, cull, but there's nothing doing. All the case goods on the premises belong to me now. Good afternoon. Call again when you're in need of service. We'll fix your mud guards and sell you four square gallons of gas every time you order five."

Instead of seeking the nearest door King raised a brow.

"I'm afraid that you misunderstand me entirely. I have no liquor here that I wish to take away. If you and your friend will come downstairs I'll jolly soon show you what I called for."

We slid across the garage to a flight of stairs, fell down them and waited until our host produced a key and unlocked the door he had led us up to. A dazzling electric light was switched on and what we saw was a fairly spacious chamber that had been fitted up as a makeshift gymnasium. There were rows of Indian clubs and dumbbells, chest-weight machines, a sand dummy, skipping ropes, flopping mats, and a soap box full of gloves.

Ottie swallowed his disappointment and rolled a lamp hastily about.

"So this is what Water, the car washer, meant when he said you were down with the bells and the bags, eh? What's the big idea?"

King smiled sheepishly.

"I rather imagine that I will be more successful in the prize ring than in the garage business. At college I used to spar a bit and more than once several people told me that I should go out after amateur welterweight laurels. I've always kept fit and top hole, you know. Personally, I believe the ring is where I can convince father that I'm not quite the unambitious, shiftless waster he imagines. At least it's worth a trial. The very worst thing that can happen to me will be a damaged nasal appendage."

"Yeah? Don't kid yourself. You're as liable as not to draw a busted beak," Ottie cut in. "So you're set to be a slapper, is that so? I don't know whether you read the papers but I used to be in the box business myself. How many battles have you pulled, if so when, where, why and what's your record?"

King coughed and buttoned his neat tweed jacket.

"To be perfectly candid I've had only one professional engagement so far. That was one night last week at the Paralytic A. C. in Jersey City. Under the nom de plume of 'Left Hook' Swain I opened the card and went six rounds to a draw with some local rowdy who was introduced as 'Cockeye' Callahan."

"Callahan!" Ottie broke in. "I know that jobbie. He's got a punch that could kill a hippo—when he's sober. If you kept the small of your back off the mat and did six stanzas with him you can't be so terrible. Who's your manager, where do you train and what's the next date, if any, on your slate?"

The handsome King gave orders to a couple of day laborers who shuffled in to pack the gym stuff up before going through with the third degree.

"I've been both managing and training myself so far, you know. Perhaps I've neglected the latter because the garage business distracted me and frequently I was too tired to put my entire mind to it. My next encounter, you ask? It's rather odd. After the Jersey City affair I was approached by a Mr. Pitz. This Pitz has charge of a pugilist who has been somewhat of a sensation and who is called Right Hook Lane. He wants me to sign articles to meet Lane next month in a final bout at the Metropolis A. C. I'm to let him know definitely by Thursday."

At this Ottie's eyes lighted like bonfires. He smacked his lips and shook hands with me.

"I hope you didn't miss any of that, Joe. Looie, the little stiff, is trying to match that wiz of his with what he thinks is a set-up. Don't you get it? A little easy jack, a K. O. in the first frame and all the newspaper gab. Fond mamma! I'd like to tip over his apple cart and knock his plans for a loop. Picture that mountain lion of his getting chewed up by what the pair of them think is a Pekingese lap cat. Maybe it wouldn't be a sight worth seeing! Listen," he said to King, with what might be described as a dash of excitement, "I know these two tramps not well but too well. Pitz talks too much with his mouth and Lane ought to be stiffened on general principles. Now pay attention. Give me the name of the gym where you expect to work and I'll call around and watch you step. If you've got anything at all except a pair of arms I'll manage you myself for nothing, shape you up like the Winter Garden and teach you tricks you'd have to have your head beaten off to learn otherwise. Make me?"

The former owner of the Night-and-Day

Garage looked a trifle surprised but didn't hesitate.

"I've made arrangements to practice at Harry O'Rosenblum's gymnasium over on Fifty-sixth Street. I'll be there to-morrow morning from ten o'clock until noon, at which time I would be most happy to have you call. It will be jolly nice of you and if you can furnish me with a fair estimate of my prowess and ability you may be sure I'll be deeply appreciative."

"A return to prosperity has undoubtedly unbalanced you," I told the big egg when King and an express wagon full of the gymnasium paraphernalia departed. "You might think Lane is as phony as the Bell System but I'm telling you that he's the next welterweight champ of the world. It's a crime to send a green boy in against him."

Scandrel shrugged this off with the indifference of a duck getting rid of a raindrop.

"*You* think so, but let me tell you this. The bim I train is *trained*. If King looks good to me in action I'll have him ready to crash Dempsey, Harry Wills, Greb and Tunney all in one ring at the same time." He threw a glance at his arm clock and another at the back of the garage where the herd of busy mechanics were still working on Merla Nevin's horseless carriage. "I got a date now with the lady who owns that ark, so stay around, keep an eye on the gas pump, don't let no one short change me and if there are any callers from the advertisement I put in the paper for Cutey's car start with a thousand dollars but don't take less than eighty-five cash. And be sure to meet me to-morrow morning. You can clean out the office while you're waiting, if you want. I'll let you."

A nice fellar, what?

More out of curiosity than for any other reason I met Ottie the following morning at the rendezvous. He showed up rubbing his hands and grinning like a child at the sight of a new drum.

"You seem," I murmured, "pleased about something. What did you do—look in the mirror?"

He took off his new hat, admired it, put it back and sighed.

"Like the party said whose wife threw the contents of the kitchen at him—everything is coming my way. Equal this if you're able, Joe. Not thirty minutes ago by a grandfather's clock a customer who read the advertisement comes down to the carriage to look at the four-wheeled cup of custard. It's Right Hook Lane or I can touch the back of my neck with the end of my heel. I didn't tell him my name and I don't think he recognized me. He said the car was just exactly what he was looking for but he didn't want to meet the price. He only wants to pay two fifty and I'm holding out for two sixty-five. He's to think it over and let me know before the end of the month. It's a sure sale and I kill two stones with one bird. Not only do I set myself in right with the little blond lady who wears the classy shrouds but I stick Pitz's world beater with the most renowned piece of junk ever seen since the last crop of heavyweights. Come on, let's go up and slant King."

Harry O'Rosenblum, an ex-convict who had switched from the wire to the bag tappers, greeted us at the door and after listening to what Scandrel had to say nodded like a cuckoo in a Swiss clock.

"You're talking from King, mebbe? Do I know is he good, do I know is he bad? Esk me and I can't tell you. He pays me twelve dollars a day for the use of the gym and for twelve dollars he could be a halfwit, what I care? He's inside getting dressed like a chorus girl. He tells me he expects it company this morning and that I should get him a good tough boy to play with."

"Who's the good tough boy?" our hero inquired.

O'Rosenblum risked a smile that let us in on the secret of his one tooth.

"'Rusty' Hogan. Go ahead in and look around. How is business by you, O'Grady?"

We mingled with a couple of dozen cast-iron gangsters, plug-uglies and pugilists who were throwing the dice and the bull. In twenty minutes or so Jerry King came out of his boudoir wrapped up in a violent violet kimono. The good-looking son of Old King, the coal millionaire, yawned behind his gloved hand and greeted us with some enthusiasm.

We had time only for a short sample of his patter before Rusty Hogan, a former stevedore who was unfavorably known in sporting circles as a boxer and who had at least fifty pounds on King, swaggered in. With his wire hair, his brassy smile, his steely gaze and his iron jaw Hogan was a walking hardware store.

He cast one contemptuous look at King, threw away the drag he was puffing on and climbed into the ring. A big mockie in a faded red sweater volunteered to act as timekeeper and a few of his playmates left the dice tournament to come over and bid King good-by.

Even O'Rosenblum seemed slightly agitated.

"I hope the police don't hound me for this," he muttered. "With my record they should railroad me for twenty, thirty years, mebbe. This ain't business—this is taking a chance!"

"Simply watch my style of action," King requested. "I realize that I have a jolly lot to learn before I meet Right Hook Lane. I'll be thankful for advice, you know."

He dropped the bath robe, revealing a well-knit body, a chest big enough to support locomotives and a waist like a débutante. Then he swung up into the ring, said something to Hogan and an instant later, without bothering to shake hands or kiss, the fray was on.

Our one regret was that it hadn't been staged in Madison Square Garden!

Disregarding and not waiting for the bell, King and Hogan tore into each other like a pair of cats from different neighborhoods. There was action from the first punch to the last punch and the Marquis of Queensberry might have drawn up a set of rules governing parchesi for all the notice either took of them. Catching King short with a left and a right, Hogan jabbed a hook to the mouth and a left to the body. We looked for the heir to the coal business to take the pad with alacrity but he weathered both wallops and came through with a sizzling uppercut that rocked Hogan like an old-fashioned cradle.

Hogan hung on, used a wicked rabbit punch in the break, hit low in the next exchange and continued with a variety of unsportsmanlike tactics that no more stopped King than a paper fence would a runaway horse.

With all the inmates of the gymnasium yelling their heads off, he fought Hogan across the ring with rights and lefts while O'Rosenblum in his excitement, swung upon the ropes and offered his favorite blackjack. The timekeeper rang the gong frantically but the end of the round meant as little to King and Hogan as a Fourteenth Street department store to the Vanderbilt family.

With the claret flowing freely, one of King's glims out for good and Hogan's face a complete ruin, they took turns spilling each other but fooling the crowd by jumping up and coming back for further assault and battery without waiting to take any part of a count.

O sole mio!

In the center of the ring King did terrible damage with a straight right to the kidneys and a scissors hook to the head. Hogan hung on, missed with a left jab and a right swing and had three punches thrown at him before he could cover up. He closed in and they stood toe to toe and slugged, but it was a cinch to see King had all the advantage of it and that Hogan was tiring rapidly.

With encouraging shouts from the gallery who overlooked the fact that Hogan was one of them, King tore loose and prepared to administer a final pasting. With his left he jabbed the groggy Hogan off so he could measure him and unleashed a mattress wallop.

"That's pretty!" Ottie roared above the tumult. "The old right now and take your time, kid! Measure him and then straight to the button. Let her go!"

King obliged and Master Hogan shot through the ropes, doubled up like a blanket and broke three camp chairs when he landed. Then, just to make it even all around, King rushed over and knocked the wildly excited Mr. O'Rosenblum cold, kicked the timekeeper in the face and would have beaten up the rest of the gym if Ottie hadn't grabbed a red pail marked *"Fire"* and dashed the contents over him.

At that he had to hit King with the bucket before he could restore order.

"A fighting fool and no mistake, Joe! So Right Hook Lane is a bear cat in action? Well, he'd better have his obituary set up in type because this baby is going to take him the same as Pershing took Manila Bay. I'll get O'Rosenblum to act as manager so Pitz won't suspect there's a West Indian in the woodpile, we'll sign immediately on *any* terms and then I'll toss a stiff dose of condition into Jerry. Look—he's emerging from it!"

King sat up, shook some water away, grinned sheepishly and yawned.

"What happened? Really, I remember

my antagonist fouling me on several occasions. Did I lose my temper? And tell me —in what respect is improvement necessary?"

To continue.

The articles and terms of combat for an engagement between Right Hook Lane and Left Hook Swain were signed the next day and later the same afternoon Looie Pitz strolled into the Bronx gym, his silk hat newly ironed, Lane a pace back of him.

The dangerous welter was a tough-looking proposition who wore a sneer, a smile as false as his teeth, one good ear and some burlesque clothing. Pitz seated him and tossed a grin at me.

"We just now signed for a roll over, O'Grady. I'm letting the kid earn a little pin money by sticking the count on some mate who copies us by going around as Left Hook Swain. He's a flashy proposition and the one round he stays will go swell with the scribes. Why shouldn't we take something soft while we're waiting for the champ to accept one of our daily challenges?"

"I understand Swain went six rounds with Callahan," I said by way of diversion.

"Callahan?" Lane sneered. "That bolognie is as soft as an omelet. I could put on my shoes with one hand and lick him with the other. Who is this Swain guy? He looks like a duke or something to me."

He continued mumbling threats until it was half past five and Pitz led him off for an interview with some sporting editor who had a four-o'clock appointment with them both.

While tempus fugited Ottie, running the garage and training Jerry King, was as busy as a queen bee on the first day of spring. He had set up training quarters on the top floor of the Night-and-Day Garage, he used the mechanics as sparring partners and he let the well-bred youth do his roadwork along the East River. No reporters ever ventured into the lair because Ottie kept his protégé's whereabouts dark and his only expense was bribes for the cops who grabbed their nightsticks and rushed after King with cries of "Stop thief!" when he was doing a morning spin!

As a day-and-night caller at the garage with a finger on the pulse of the situation it wasn't difficult for me to see that King was coming along nicely. Under Ottie's tutelage he was discovering how to get everything out of a punch, how to use his left and what to do with his feet. Planting me to watch the gas pump, Ottie had developed the habit of rushing up to the top floor every afternoon to lace on the gloves and give King his daily music lesson.

Scandrel might have been a conceited ignoramus, the fool of luck and so small that he could ride horseback on an ant, but when he made up his mind to put something across bullets couldn't stop him!

I understood vaguely that he was rushing around Broadway with Merla Nevin, the Queen of the Blondes, in his spare minutes, but I never suspected what he was framing up until he displayed a solid-diamond, real-gold engagement ring that he had taken out of pawn on a ticket he had found in the back seat of one of the cars stored in the garage.

This he displayed in confidence one afternoon a few days before the fight when King was doing a kip on an upstairs couch and one of the mechanics was preparing repair bills by slipping around the motors and stealthily removing a dozen or more of their magnetos.

"When a gal asks some gils for a ring they get an alarm clock," Scandrel chuckled, dropping the engagement ice carelessly back in his waistcoat pocket. "Wait'll Merla gets a peek at this inducement. I'll give her the ring first and ask her afterward. And picture me with a wiff earning two grand or so a week. All I'll have to worry about in the future is how long she will keep her looks and be able to sing and dance."

"Then it's all arranged?"

"Er—not exactly. After the fight's over I'm taking her to the Golden Slipper Supper Club and that's where I goal her with the hock rock and the proposition. I can't lose on this——"

He was interrupted by the appearance of a mechanic who had twelve dollars' worth of lubricating oil on his pan and overalls.

"There's a fifteen-thousand-dollar Rolls-Arrow outside, boss," this number stated. "The party inside it wants to see you. What'll I do?"

"Send him in," Ottie directed, "and while he's talking to me puncture a back shoe so we'll be sure of a little something. Get me?"

The other touched his cap and ducked.

There was a few minutes' intermission and then we had with us an elderly gentleman who closely resembled Palm Beach in the winter, Newport in the summer and Wall Street the rest of the year. He was a little gray and careworn and leaned heavily on his stick.

"Our aim is service," was Ottie's greeting. "Carbon burned out for a buck a cylinder, brakes lined with the care of fur coats and batteries charged like the Light Brigade. How much of a strain can you stand?"

The caller smiled slightly and sat down.

"I think," he began, "I had better introduce myself. My name is Benjamin King, sometimes known as Old King. My son Jeremiah telephoned me last night and explained the details of his latest enterprise. Prize fighting is a manly art and some of my fondest recollections are battles of the old guard—'Lanky Bob' Fitzsimmons, Tom Sharkey, Peter Maher, Jim Corbett—fighting men who fought like men. Jeremiah tells me that you are handling him. In confidence—how good or bad is the boy?"

Ottie made a gesture.

"He's the crocodile's cough, Mr. King, and don't let no one tell you different. He might be as lazy as a daisy in the sun but once he's in a ring and gets a couple of clouts to wake him up he's a tiger."

The elder King nodded.

"That's exactly what I wanted to learn. The outcome of this prize fight is of great importance. I've decided that upon it shall rest the future of my business. If Jeremiah can win it will be proof enough for me that he has the stuff in him to do something well and to fight the battle of business. If he loses, I'm practically certain that I'll hand the entire establishment over to my sister's boy, my young nephew, McSweeney. Ah—there will be a few thousand dollars in it for you if the lad wins. You need not tell Jeremiah I was here to-day. He will see me at the ringside where I have already reserved seats. That, I believe, is all. Thank you. Good day."

"The same to you—don't mention it," Ottie whinnied, opening and closing the door. "A few thousand in it for me, Joe? This is a big day for me. I forgot to tell you that Right Hook Lane has decided to buy the yellow-dog roadster for two hundred and sixty-five dollars and seventy-five cents precisely. *That* also will help along the proposal. Lady Luck is certainly carrying on an outrageous flirtation with me!"

The night of the Lane-Swain bout found Jerry King polished up like a brass front-door knob, as cool as all summer resorts are advertising to be and as confident as a crook in the dock with a political lawyer whispering to the judge. I didn't invade the dressing room but went directly to my ringside seat which was one row removed from the chairs occupied by Benjamin King and several of his business acquaintances. As I sat down I noticed King handing a couple of letters to a young man who looked like a secretary but failed to see more for the reason that in the excitement of the semifinal a stout gentleman on my left used my ear as an ash receiver.

With old King champing at the bit the star bout was finally ready to go on. Left Hook Swain entered the ring first to mild applause and Lane, trailed by his seconds and handlers, showed up a minute later and won a roar of admiring approval. Then Ottie had a lot to say that meant little, bandages were examined, the announcer announced, Pitz took himself and his silk hat out of the ring, the rest of the bunch followed suit, the gong clanged and the battle began.

It's perfectly safe to say that no fan present felt that he wasn't receiving full value in return for the price of his admission ticket. The mill was scheduled to go twelve rounds and went the limit with terrific action characterizing every minute of them and the pendulum of victory swinging first in Lane's direction and then in King's. Knockdowns were as frequent as Reds in Russia. If Lane won a round, King was certain to even it up by taking the next and when the final bell rang and the draw that was a foregone conclusion was handed out, the crowd showed their appreciation of the fair verdict by getting up on their heels and cheering for twenty minutes straight.

The only one who failed to register delight was Scandrel.

"Them crooks!" he moaned when I went down to the dressing room. "Jerry had it on points nine out of the twelve chapters. A tough break for you, kid," he went on, turning to the handsome youth. "You lose the coal business and I'm out them few thousand your old gent mentioned. Let's catch this Lane baby upstairs and knock his nut off. What do you say?"

Before King could say anything the dressing-room door opened and his father and cane entered. The anthracite magnate swept the room with a glance, handed Ottie a check and crossing to his son slapped him heartily on the back.

"Splendid, splendid, Jeremiah! I knew that once you learned the true identity of your opponent and he learned yours the bout would be sensational from the instant it began."

"Hold everything!" Ottie bawled, shoving the check in a side pocket. "You're as mysterious as a detective going up a fire escape, Mr. King. What do you mean—the identity of his opponent? *Who* is Right Hook Lane?"

Jerry King stretched languidly and smiled.

"Lane? He's merely Adolphus McSweeney, the uncouth cousin I told you about. Father had him looked up, learned that he was a pugilist and just before we both left for the ring sent his secretary down with a note to each of us explaining matters and telling us that the winner would be the one who received the business. Jolly idea, what? Just like a book or a movie."

Benjamin King turned his shrewd eyes affectionately on his son.

"Neither of you won, so it's up to *me* to be the referee. Jeremiah, the coal business is yours! Take it, keep it running, but don't bother me with anything concerning it. I'm off to Pinehurst in the morning to play golf until I haven't enough strength to reach the green with an iron. Take it, my boy, it's yours!"

Young King yawned.

"Thanks a lot, father. Jolly nice of you and all that. But I don't think I'm interested. You'd better speak to Adolphus. I understand he's worked around the coal mines of Pennsylvania and he's probably looking for a soft-coal job. I've found the one thing I can do better than anything else and with Mr. Scandrel to guide me, I'm going to try and get a crack at fame, fortune and the champ!"

Exactly twenty minutes after that we rushed into the Golden Slipper Supper Club and discovered the beautiful Merla Nevin waiting for us in the foyer. The blondie was chuckling at something that amused her greatly. While Ottie's fingers went directly to his waistcoat pocket she broke into silvery laughter and spilled it.

"You simply must pardon my mirth," she gurgled. "A girl on the stage receives the most laughable propositions at times. Let me tell you about one of them. For quite some time now Right Hook Lane, the prize fighter, has been paying me devoted attention, never dreaming I've been happily married for the past seven years. This afternoon after the matinée he called at the theater to propose matrimony and offer me an unusual inducement to accept. You can never, never guess what this inducement was."

Ottie slipped the pawn-ticket diamond ring out of his vest pocket, handed it to the girl in charge of the coatroom, drew a breath and tried to smile.

"If we can't guess you had better tell us. *What* was the inducement?"

Merla Nevin giggled again.

"Right Hook Lane wanted to give me a car," she explained. "A beautiful yellow roadster he had just purchased at some garage uptown and which he claimed was as good as new. Fancy that!"

Another story by Mr. Montanye in the next issue.

* * *

NOT GUILTY!

BEFORE Doctor Jesse C. Clore of Madison, Virginia, began visiting his multitudinous patients in a Ford, he had a buggy in which an old colored man named Zeb drove him over his territory. Zeb's professional pride surpassed that of Doctor Clore, and, on hearing him talk, the public was obliged to conclude that his master not only seldom lost a case but frequently brought dying men back from the grave.

One day, passing through a small town far out in the county, the doctor noticed black crape on a front door, and inquired:

"Who's dead in that house, Zeb?"

"Dunno, Mistuh Doctor," replied Zeb, carefully looking around to see that he was not overheard; "dunno nothin' 'tall erbout him. But I does puffickly recall and remembuh dat, whosumevuh he is, he ain't none of our killin'!"

The Hoodoo Kiwi

By Kenneth Latour

Author of "Home for Christmas," "The Last Crash," Etc.

When we read Latour's first story about aviation, "The Last Crash," we were impressed with one thing in particular: It was our first experience of a story dealing with flyers and flying that stuck to the air, rejecting as dramatic material everything not typical of the element and the people of the element from which the author drew his inspiration. Here is another tale from the same pen which is distinguished for the same quality. It tells of what happens in the air when a groundsman tries to show the way. The problem of the groundsman in command was for a long time a typical problem of aviation. Veteran fliers are all too familiar with it. They have given the name of "kiwi" to the men who live by the air without being of it. An apt epithet, it is, for the kiwi is a New Zealand bird who probably would like to fly but can't because he hasn't any wings. The feathered kiwi is a harmless fowl, but the human kiwi is sometimes a man killer. This story tells why.—THE EDITOR.

(A Complete Novel)

THERE had been a crash that day at Douglas Field, and after the evening mess somebody, inevitably, let fall the word "hoodoo." Airmen, because of the chancy nature of their profession, are apt to look behind the practical for the explanation of all sorts of things.

John Norris, who held curious and very particular views touching the supernatural and the psychic, caught the word up and began to toy with it. Whereupon the group on the screened porch at the officers' club—which at Douglas overlooks the airdrome and the hangars—fell silent. For when Norris began to amuse himself with a word like hoodoo it was understood that the time was for listening.

"Hoodoo!" mused Norris aloud. And again, "Hoodoo!" He sucked at his pipe. "H'm! Well, I don't know—that is, about this business to-day. It looked like plain bad flying to me. But there *are* such things. I remember one that haunted an entire post. This hoodoo was also a kiwi—a flying kiwi, which is the worst kind, you understand. One of those birds—now almost extinct—

who got the wings and didn't know how to use 'em. His name was Fallon.

"There were some remarkable angles to his case," Norris went on. "Not exactly orthodox, you might say. Especially as regarded Pratt. Some of you know Pratt, eh? You wouldn't think *he* ever had the wind up, would you? But, pshaw! I fancy we've all had a touch of that, more or less. Hell, isn't it? Now this hoodoo kiwi——"

And he launched into his story. It was better as Norris told it, for he was talking to men who understood the language and the allusions of the shop. And so he could set forth with a word what here must be expanded into twenty for the sake of lucidity. But with such amplification and ornamentation as seem necessary, this is the story Norris told.

I.

"Damn all kiwis!" said Cobb, unpacking his suit case while Norris told him the worst. "Damn all kiwis!"

"Keep your shirt on, Bill," soothed Norris. "I haven't gotten by the introduction yet. What *will* you say when I reach the story?"

Cobb kicked the empty suit case under his Q. M. cot and turned a pair of placid blue eyes on his lanky companion. Cobb's eyes were something out of the ordinary. They revealed an inward and an outward candor that is exceedingly rare and precious. They held no reservations. The owner of those eyes, you could not fail to perceive, was a man of strong convictions—convictions based rather on experience and a sort of downright honest instinct than on finely tortured processes of reason. What Cobb knew, he knew—this was what his eyes implied—because he had been there and seen. What his opinion was of the things he knew would be a matter of intuition. And he would, you might guess, be a man to act on his opinions, without very much reference to general expediency—and none at all to personal consequences. A man, you would decide after you had studied his eyes, worth going a long way to meet. Also, perhaps, a man worth traveling far to avoid.

"Last Crash" Cobb, he was sometimes called. That was because of a fatalistic trick of speech which distinguished him and characterized his professional philosophy. "There's always got to be a last crash," he would remark callously when the airman's uncertain tenure of life came under discussion. "Who wants to die in a bed?"

Not Cobb, certainly. Nor did he. But that story has been told. What is related here happened long before Billy Cobb went to his last crash.

"Go on, John," said Cobb, those placid eyes of his on his tall roommate. He produced a sack of tobacco and a packet of straw papers and settled down to listen, a slender cigarette held stiff in his straight lips.

Norris touched a match to his pipe, blew a cloud of smoke, considered its shifting pattern, blew another cloud, considered that critically, shook his head, squinted his luminous brown eyes, blew a third cloud, was satisfied with that—and resumed.

It was a dismal tale. A tale of tyranny and tragedy, the story of Langstrom Field and its hoodoo. Outside through the night a February norther moaned a dour obbligato to his theme, and presently snow began to hiss against the single window of the bare, beaver-boarded cubicle where the two friends sat in an acrid cloud of pipe-and-cigarette fumes, with a smoking oil stove between their knees.

Not until the short hours of morning did Norris knock the last load of dottle from his pipe and conclude: "You'll understand all this better once you've seen Fallon. He has to be seen to be believed. But you'll know why nine men have gone out, after you size him up."

He laid his pipe aside, with that, and stepped to the door giving onto the center corridor of the long hut where the bachelor officers of Langstrom Field were quartered. He opened the door and poked his head out. Then Cobb saw his finger beckoning.

"What is it?" said Billy, wedging his wide shoulders into the doorway beneath the narrow ones of his roommate.

"Listen!" whispered Norris.

First Cobb heard a muffled medley of snores. Then, out of the general confusion of sleeping noises, he distinguished a slow regular moaning.

"Hear it?" said Norris. "That's young Pratt."

An agonized cry split the silence of the hut. Then a prolonged, hoarse scream. Next a rapid succession of short desperate grunts that dwindled away until the silence was restored. But now the drowsy undertone of snores had ceased. The whole hut had been wakened by the screaming. Cobb heard a man in the room across the corridor rolling in his blankets and cursing.

Norris stepped back into their cubicle and drew Cobb after him. He closed the door softly.

"Pshaw!" said Billy. "That's a shame. The poor kid!"

"You see now how it is!" said Norris. "Pratt tells me he dreams of crashing every night. He isn't the only sufferer, either. Just one of the worst. That's what comes of men like Fallon meddling in this business!"

"I know it," said Cobb.

They went to bed. In five minutes Norris was snoring. Cobb lay awake, listening to the norther beating on the window. He was turning things over in his mind.

For an hour he lay, thinking hard. Then he did a curious thing. Throwing his blankets aside he raised himself on an elbow, reached across the narrow space separating his cot from his roommate's, and shook Norris' shoulder.

"John!" said Cobb, in an urgent whisper. "John!"

"Huh?" grunted Norris, coming half awake painfully. "What you want?"

"When's the next full moon?"

"How should I know? Go to sleep! Let me go to sleep!"

"Shucks!" complained Billy. "Don't you know, John?"

But Norris was snoring.

"Shucks!" said Cobb again, and closed his eyes.

II.

As Norris said—and it should be noted that what immediately follows is a condensed paraphrase of his talk that night with Cobb—when men like Martin Fallon tempt the air there is always trouble. It may be added that men like Martin Fallon in any business make trouble. The uninspired brute is a dismal object wherever he occurs. But particularly so when he usurps the lead in a domain where the very lives of men depend on the inspiration and the sympathy of their leaders. Then he makes not only trouble, but tragic trouble. He becomes a homicidal influence—nothing less.

If you can conceive the possibility of a chief steward—and a beastly one, to boot—ruling the bridge of a seagoing vessel, with all that so fantastic a hypothesis implies, you will be able to understand what Fallon meant to Langstrom. For the analogy is accurate.

The first requisite of a seaman into whose hands is confided the safety of a vessel and the souls aboard is understanding of the sea. Likewise, the first requisite of an air commander is understanding of the air. He may have all the virtues and graces—but if he isn't a flyer he cannot be an air leader.

Now Fallon had few of the virtues, and none of the graces. And he knew nothing of the air, except at secondhand. A misguided chief had seen in him an administrator of ability, and so had imagined in him a commander of parts. That the man couldn't fly meant nothing to the chief. The chief couldn't fly, either.

"Any ass can do that," said the chief who couldn't. "Flyers are plentiful but executives are few. Call him a flyer—never mind the regulations—and we'll use him to advantage. He's a wizard at organization."

So Fallon got the silver wings. This was necessary because he must hold a flyer's rating or he could not hold command. He got them by order, but never by right. He was a "paper flyer"—a "flying kiwi."

And every month some better man rode him around in a ship for half an hour—they call it "pay hopping"—and he got fifty per centum tacked onto his check for having "participated in frequent and regular flights," all according to act of Congress providing therefor. Which was why he came into the business and why he remained—the only reason. He was a mercenary of the air.

For he couldn't understand the air or airmen. He hated flying and he hated flyers, naturally. He was vain and he was envious. The air had worsted him and wounded his vanity; the men of the air had compassed something beyond him and earned his envy.

But he persisted. There was that fifty per cent to hold him. As long as he could muster the courage to make his monthly excursions, personally conducted, around the airdrome, he was content. And to tell the truth it didn't take much courage to achieve those puny expeditions. He picked his pilots with extreme care. And he saw that the ships to which he confided his person were beyond suspicion. In fact he reserved one ship for this especial mission. At Langstrom they came to call it "the pay ship." Every thirty days it made one sortie. Then for thirty more days it loafed in the hangar with the cunningest talent on the field to keep it groomed. Fallon's longevity expectations were therefore excellent. He admitted this to himself with satisfaction. A major's pay plus fifty per cent—and no dependents—was worth living for. And he looked ahead to the halcyon day when it should be a colonel's pay. Quit the air? Hardly! Already his girth was waxing with good living and his beady black eyes were ambushed deep between rich chunks of bulging fat.

His method of commanding was to find fault. And having found fault, to intimidate. He had a bull voice and a grammatically acrimonious style of delivery. Langstrom Field, at the time Billy Cobb arrived, was sharply divided in its reactions to his method. Some of it—the greater part—was intimidated. The residue—a handful of stubborn souls—was chronically infuriated. He was pleased with both reactions. The intimidated majority fed his vanity—gave him a consciousness of power. The infuriated few sated his hatred of their kind—and also gave him a pleasing illusion of power, in that their fury could not reach him.

But don't fancy that he had no qualities whatever. He *was* a demon organizer. He had a mania, figuratively speaking, for settling everything in its proper place and slapping on six coats of paint. He believed in the virtue of outward appearance. An astute belief, because outward appearance is about all inspecting superiors have time to survey as a rule. Three months after Fallon took control at Langstrom you wouldn't have known the place. It was a toy Swiss village, gaudy—and lifeless.

And five men had died violently in those three first months of Fallon's tour! Sinister coincidence? Not at all. Logical effect of a traceable cause—and Fallon the cause.

Flyers are not geniuses or demigods. They are very human mortals. Human mortals do not do good work under repugnant leadership. If the leader has no enthusiasm for the work—despises it in fact—the subalterns can scarcely put their hearts in it. A repugnant, antagonistic leader makes two kinds of workers—stale, soulless drudges, and bitter, dangerous mutineers. Flying is like other professions. Its chiefest safeguard against failure is enthusiasm. But whereas failure on the ground is only failure, failure in the air is often death.

There you have it. The subjugated, spirit-broken airman goes stale and makes fatal mistakes. The mutinous airman goes crazy and commits suicidal follies. Three days—let alone three months—of Fallon at Langstrom had spread melancholia and mutiny through the post like twin plagues.

The air is a mysterious element. It is full of dark potentialities. Like the sea. And like the sea it grants security only at the price of unrelenting vigilance. Relax that vigilance and, as Norris put it, "Things begin to happen."

Things had begun happening at Langstrom. But Fallon had no idea why. He had done everything the books prescribe—or rather he had ordered the prescriptions enforced, and backed the order with dire threats. Discipline—what passed with him for discipline—was impeccable. Paint glistened, buttons gleamed, shoes shone, desks were clear and tidy. Yet men killed themselves and wrecked his ships.

The real trouble—which Fallon couldn't perceive—was glaringly apparent. Though the letter was being enforced, the spirit was dead. The field had been crammed into the mold of its master. It was an administrative machine. And an administrative machine is not a safe harbor for flyers. It has no soul, no nerve, no collective or individual sense of responsibility. The pride of the field was gone. Eight hours a day—or maybe twelve—it went through perfunctory motions perfunctorily. The inspiration to vision trouble and forestall it was gone. Appearance had become the idol. Airplanes shone on the outside. But inside, where Fallon never looked, their engines were foul with carbon, and nobody knew whether the dry rot was in their wing spars or not. The men who could, and would, have attended to these things—the competent and experienced men—sat at desks and wound red tape. Norris, for instance, worked over shipping tickets, and invoices, and stock records. Those who were least fitted for any work—either because they were born without capacity or had not the experience—held all the posts of mortal responsibility.

Fallon had come to Langstrom in April.

One man was buried that month. May saw three more leave the air for Mother Earth. And in June another. Five in the first three months! And Langstrom began to talk of hoodoos. In July there were ten forced landings besides three bad crashes and as many hospital cases. August brought another harvest of minor accidents and killed the sixth man. And in September two more pilots passed out the main gate behind slow music.

The next three months were merciful—although the toll in wrecked equipment was scandalous. But January took mortal tribute again. This time it was a courier posting the air to Washington in the face of storm warnings that Blaise, the elderly half-wit in charge of operations, had disregarded; "Because," he sobbed, overcome when he heard the news, "the major said to send a ship down and—you know! What could I do?"

The body of lovable little Barney McCall—he was flying alone; they say he had a premonition and wouldn't risk a mechanic's life—was found a week later, frozen stiff in a snowdrift, beside the wreck of his plane. He was leagues off his course, in the wilderness of the Alleghenies when he crashed.

There was considerable stir over his death, it seemed. A colonel, or somebody, who claimed relationship with the boy, wrote letters about it. And presently Blaise departed from Langstrom, bowed under the weight of a heavy buck that somebody had bequeathed him. This was satisfactory to Fallon. But Barney McCall remained quite dead.

Now it chanced that Billy Cobb was puttering around temporarily in the training division at Washington when the confirmation of McCall's death came through. And Benchley, the assistant chief, after checking once again the mortality record of Langstrom under the Fallon régime—and conferring vainly with higher authority—sent for Billy. The assistant chief was very much a flyer. He worked for the air, not for flying pay. And he had been putting one and one together to make two for many months. He knew perfectly well what was wrong at Langstrom. But between knowing what is wrong and collecting legal evidence there is a broad hiatus. The assistant chief must have evidence before he could move, for Fallon was intrenched behind breastworks of favor too thick and strong for even Benchley to breach with the weight of his own unsupported opinion.

So, with verbal instructions of a highly improper and confidential nature, and with orders naming him simply as replacement for McCall, deceased, Billy Cobb went to Langstrom to see what could be done.

"And," said Benchley to a lean and grizzled veteran with eagles on his straps who dropped in a day or so after Cobb's departure, "you know Billy!"

III.

Cobb awoke from his first sleep at Langstrom with Norris shaking his shoulder. The storm of the night had blown over and the sun was shining.

"What—hell—John?" mumbled Billy. "Go way! Wanta sleep!"

"Can't, Bill," said Norris. "Fallon's orders. Everybody out of quarters by eight o'clock. Hit the floor!"

"Huh?" queried Cobb. "Say, I've got nothing to do yet. Ain't assigned, am I? What's an hour's sleep to Fallon? What's this, a convict camp?"

"Pretty damned near," said Norris. "Get up if you don't want to be skinned."

Billy got up.

"Say," questioned Norris, strapping on his puttees, "did I dream it or did you wake me up last night with some childishness about the moon?"

"You didn't dream it," sputtered Cobb from the washbasin.

"Well, what in time did you mean?"

"Never mind. Just a little idea that Pratt gave me. I was thinking that two could play at dreams like that. Dig me up an almanac to-day, will you John? I'm thinking about introducing lunar aviation to Langstrom."

He would say no more.

Presently a downcast orderly with luminous buttons and dazzling shoes came in to make their beds and they tramped out.

Cobb got his first daylight view of Langstrom. Some twenty huts and cottages, he saw, ranged in orderly files, immaculate with white paint and gay green trimmings under a new-spread blanket of snow. Beyond stretched the white expanse of airdrome, glittering in the morning sun, with the long blue shadows of the hangars flung across it.

"Bright," said Cobb as they trudged

through the six-inch fall toward the club. "But cold. It looks very cold."

"It is," said Norris. "Inside as well as out—very cold."

The post counted some thirty officers. A dozen of the unmarried ones were already at table when Cobb and Norris reached the messroom. One or two glanced up. But only one or two. The rest kept their eyes on their plates and chewed without visible relish. Billy said something to Norris about the cud of bitterness.

"Yes," said Norris.

He led the way toward a table apart where a thick pair of shoulders and a bristling red head were hunched over a plate of hash. Until they reached this table Cobb paid no attention to its solitary tenant. He was savoring the strange atmosphere of that room and its occupants. There was something tangibly oppressive in the air. It puzzled him until he ran it down, isolated, and analyzed it. The room was full of clatter. Yet it seemed silent.

Suddenly somebody said, "Pass the sugar." The effect was startling, almost explosive. The words cut like a knife. And Cobb understood what it was that distinguished that scene from so many others outwardly identical. The murmur of conversation was absent. That was it. An inhuman glumness brooded there. There was noise in the room, the chinking of china, the rattle of knives and forks, but there was no articulation. A curse was on that company. The air was full of foreboding and rebellion. And not a voice—not even a sullen voice—raised to speak them out.

"Sit down, Billy," Cobb heard Norris saying. "Don't get up, Mike. Bill, this is Mike Mallory, the adjutant. This is Bill Cobb, Mike. You've heard of each other.

"Bill got in last night," Norris went on, "and routed me out. I put him up. Which reminds me, Mike; see that he's assigned permanent quarters with me."

"Sure," agreed the red-headed adjutant, extending the welcoming hand to Billy, then focusing hands and eyes again on the remains of his breakfast. "Hurry up, you two. You're late. *That man* will be looking in on us in no time."

"You mean the C. O.?" Billy questioned, while an orderly slipped a plate of hash and a cup of coffee hurriedly under his nose. "What for?"

"To make sure we're not here, dammim," mumbled Mallory through a mouthful of hash. "Nobody in the messroom after nine o'clock, you know. Boarding-school stuff. Goes against your efficiency records if he catches you. Eat up. Oh, what a hell hole!" He washed down the hash with two gulps of coffee that emptied his cup, excused himself gruffly, and was gone.

"Nice, trusting sort of fellow, this Fallon," said Billy pleasantly. "Has a world of encouraging confidence in his boys, hasn't he?"

Breakfast over, they left the club and separated, Norris turning left toward the supply shack, Cobb flanking right and around the corner in the direction of a wide, three-winged bungalow, with a veranda running round the central wing.

There were two men in the adjutant's office when Cobb came in. One was Mallory, his red bristles bowed intently over a morning report, the other a tall, slender, fair-haired boy, his boots and belt very bright, his face very somber, who sat stiffly and stared with miserable eyes that never wavered through the window across the room.

Billy glanced quickly at this second figure, then looked away and addressed himself to Mallory, extending his orders for inspection.

"All right," said the adjutant. "Sit down. That man"—he flung a gesture at an inner door, courteously labeled, "Commanding Officer—Keep Out"—"is around inspecting now."

A half hour passed. Then the outer door opened and a big man with three lines of black braid in the trefles on his overcoat sleeves came in. Mallory and the boy leaped to their feet at the rattle of the doorknob like well-trained performing animals, and Cobb, taking his cue, followed suit.

Fallon strode through the room with the heavy tread and the heave of a man whose weight is twenty pounds too much for the frame that bears it. For a second Billy felt the small fat-ambushed eyes of the hoodoo kiwi laid coldly on him, then the inner door opened and closed and the three in the outer office were alone again.

They sat down. The boy resumed his stony stare. Mallory began scribbling memoranda. And Cobb inspected the paint on the ceiling very coolly.

After some minutes he transferred his gaze to the ruddy thatch of Mallory's head

"An almanac," said Billy. "You don't happen to have one around, now? Or a lunar calendar? I want——"

The snarling of a buzzer interrupted.

"Wait," said the adjutant, punching with his thumb toward the inner door. *"He's* ringing for me."

The partitions in that flimsy bungalow were very thin. But Fallon apparently cared nothing for that. This is what Cobb heard after Mallory had answered the buzzer's summons:

"Who's that new man out there?"

"Cobb, sir. Reporting with orders for assignment."

"What do you know about him? What's he good for?"

"He's a pilot, sir. I've heard——"

"Bah! That's enough, Mallory. He can wait. See that he does it, sir. And send that idiot, Pratt, in here. I'll settle with him! Send him in!"

Mallory emerged and motioned to the boy. Pratt passed behind the inner door and Fallon's voice came through the partition again.

"Pratt!"

"Yes, sir."

"Explain this letter!"

"It's—it's a request for a transfer, sir, to—to another field."

"I can read, Pratt. Explain—explain, if you please."

"Well, sir, it isn't easy. You see, a lot of chaps I liked have been killed here. I—I was full out, once. But I've been having dreams. So I thought if I could get away from—from the place where all those chaps——"

"Nonsense! You're all the same. Because you fly airplanes you seem to think you're privileged to get cold feet when it pleases you. I know Florida is pleasant at this season. But you're not going there, young man. Or anywhere else. Unless," the snarling voice softened to a pur, "you would like to resign. Eh?"

"No, sir. Not yet. I can still make myself fly. But what I'm afraid of is that if this—this disease keeps on I'll have to go. I don't want to quit! I——"

"Disease!" broke in Fallon. "What are you talking about, sir?"

"It is, sir. I'm not naturally this way. It's grown on me—in spite of myself. And every time I try to shake it off something reminds me of—of those—other fellows—crashing! I—I wanted a—a chance to—to forget. I——"

The boy's voice was husky and desperate. Cobb found himself gripping the seat of his chair as he listened. He looked at Mallory. The red-headed adjutant was sitting with his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands. Billy could see the muscles of his jaws bulging and relaxing rhythmically.

Fallon spoke the last word. It was "Bosh!"

Pratt came out. His beardless chin was quivering. He walked across the office without appearing to see anything. Through the window Cobb watched him hurrying with head up and shoulders stiff toward the hangars.

"Look at that!" whispered Billy.

"What?" said Mallory, turning to follow Cobb's pointing finger.

"The kid! Do you know what he's going to do? He's going to fly. And in his state of mind! Yellow? That boy is a bundle of grit if I ever saw one."

"Grit and nerves!" agreed Mallory.

"And the one fighting the other. It must be devilish!" said Billy.

"Ever have it?" asked the adjutant.

"No, but I can imagine, can't you?"

"Anybody with half a heart could," said Mallory. "But," jabbing his thumb at his chief's closed door, *"that man* can't!"

Cobb's eyes narrowed dangerously. "No, he can't. But he might be made to *feel* it!"

Then the buzzer snarled. And Mallory, his mind on Pratt, forgot himself. He did a natural thing. He opened the inner door and stuck his head in.

There was an immediate explosion.

"Mallory!"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in here. Shut that door. What do you mean?"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"How many times must I tell you to come all the way in when I ring? Are you a cripple? Put your heels together, sir! Stand up! *Pull* your chin in! Understand, sir?"

Cobb heard an inarticulate noise that might have been a: "Yes, sir!"

Then Fallon: "Remember. If this occurs again, by George, you'll regret it, sir! Send that other flyer in here! Let's see what kind *he* is!"

Mallory reappeared. His face was shading to purple and he was quite speechless.

So that he had to motion Billy toward Fallon's door.

"Just a minute," said Billy, getting up. "I've been thinking that some one should go out and stop Pratt. If he flies now he may kill himself—especially the way the snow lies out there. You sneak out while I——"

Mallory gulped and nodded. "If that—that man—wants to know where I've gone," he said at last, "tell him—tell him——"

"I'll tell him you've had a sudden attack," mumbled Billy. "Go on. You need the air."

Fallon, leaning back heavily behind his desk, with his large soft hands clasped over his complacent stomach, scrutinized his new subordinate with insolent deliberation. Cobb stood the inquisition without embarrassment. Fallon saw only a sturdy, slightly bow-legged young man, of no great stature, with a shock of blond hair, and a pair of calm blue eyes that suggested to him neither timidity nor impertinence.

Cobb saw a thick-shouldered, thick-barreled man with dark eyes that were much too small for the swollen face in which they lurked. The man's mouth was small, too, but the lips were thick and favored the cupid-bow type. The upper lip protruded just a bit, but that bit was enough to give a snouty flavor to the full-cheeked visage. Also the lip had an upward twist suggesting petulance, and cruel intolerance. There were certain indications of ability in the face, the gimlet sharpness of the beady eyes, the assertive hump of the large nose, but nowhere could Cobb find a sign of generosity, imagination, or courage in those heavy features.

Fallon concluded his scrutiny and grunted. He was neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Cobb had not flinched. Fallon wished he had flinched, had cast his eyes down, or plucked at the seams of his breeches. But he had exhibited no symptom of the nervousness Fallon liked to inspire. On the other hand, he looked quite harmless.

"Your name's Cobb?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You are a pilot. Is that all?"

Billy ran through his list of attainments. They included everything that Fallon cared nothing about.

"Ah," commented Fallon smoothly, "the complete airman, eh?"

"Beg pardon, sir?" said Cobb.

"I said," repeated Fallon, his upper lip curling more pronouncedly, "the complete airman!"

"I don't understand, sir," said Cobb stupidly. When he wanted to he could have a very even temper.

"Never mind," said Fallon. "You don't have to understand. The question is, what good is a complete airman to me? None, that I can see. The market here is flooded. H'm! Well, you've got to do something besides fly. For the time being relieve that temperamental idiot Pratt. He's the engineer. He'll be your assistant until further notice. The adjutant will get out the orders—tell him that—and give you your general instructions. The main thing—you'd probably never think of it—is to keep those hangars policed. I want them clean, understand? All the time. And you will be responsible for the discipline of the crews."

"Yes, sir," said Cobb. There was no trace of exultation in his voice. But he was exultant. This was better than he had hoped. He had pictured himself incarcerated at a desk.

"That's all," said Fallon.

"Yes, sir," said Billy, rendering the prescribed courtesies and turning away.

"Oh, Cobb!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Any signs of slackness in your department, you understand, and there will be serious consequences—for you!" It was the classic threat with which Fallon clinched everything.

"I'll do my best, sir," said Billy humbly, and departed quite unruffled. In the matter which he now had in hand he had fortified his natural impassivity with a determination to keep his temper in hand and his head screwed on tight.

Mallory had not returned. The outer office was empty, and Billy, getting into his overcoat, took advantage of the solitude to indulge in a grin of triumph. His intended victim had put a trump card in his hand. Tied to a desk, Cobb had foreseen grave obstacles. He had a pretty clear idea of Fallon's sentiments with respect to desk slaves who indulged in the luxury of lengthy ærial excursions at the expense of office hours. But now his office was to be the airdrome, and, by extension, the air.

"Sitting on the world," he chuckled, as he settled his cap.

IV.

Working details were hard at it clearing the post streets when he came out on the veranda of the headquarters hut. But the wintry clumping of the snow shovels was obscured by another sound. A light cold wind out of the west, blowing across the post from the airdrome and kicking up ribbons of powdery snow as it came, brought to Cobb's ears the liquid mutter of a throttled engine, the faint smell of burning castor oil and gas, from somewhere behind the long screen of canvas Bessoneau hangars.

Billy frowned. He ran down the steps and along the walk to the street. There he checked his pace. A figure had emerged to view, coming around the corner of a hangar and through the main gap in the line toward the post. The distance was not great and Cobb recognized Pratt. The boy came on, scuffing through the snow, with head down and shoulders hunched, a picture of weary dejection. Cobb crossed the street and went to confront him.

"You're Pratt, aren't you?" said Billy.

The boy looked up blankly. "Yes," he said, his wretched eyes betraying no interest.

"My name's Cobb," said Billy, and held out his hand. "Who's warming up that ship out there?"

"Lieutenant Mallory, sir. I was just going to take it up myself, but he—he——"

"Wouldn't let you, eh? And now your heart's broken. But, look here, he's in no better frame of mind to fly than you were! We'd better try to stop this. Come on!"

Cobb set out on the run. Pratt, surprised, stood hesitant an instant, staring over his shoulder. Then he turned and stretched his legs in obedient pursuit.

They were too late by a minute. As they ran the chuckling of the engine swelled to a strident pur, gathered volume, and burst into the full-throated roar of four hundred horse unbridled. Mallory had begun the take-off already.

They watched the DH charge across the snowy field, whipping up a miniature blizzard in her wake. She took the air with a vicious leap as her pilot laid back on the stick. Then, for perhaps a second she skimmed the snow, gathering headway. Suddenly her nose came up and up until her top profile was silhouetted clear against the sky, and she fairly flung the earth away, rising with a swoop, like a swallow at a fly.

"My God!" groaned Billy. "I was afraid of this. Say a prayer!"

The boy beside him did not answer. Pratt was standing rigid, his eyes closed, his fists clenched desperately at his sides. A moment later Cobb breathed a sigh of thankfulness and said: "You can open them. He's nosed her down at last. But, believe me, son, I wouldn't have given a nickel for him or his ship about a second ago. It was all but!"

Five hundred feet overhead the DH was careening through a fast turn, her upper wing tips pointing the zenith.

Cobb watched her and shook his head. "Do you know what I think?" he said. "I think there'll be more blood on Fallon's hands to-night."

Again there was no answer, for as he spoke, Mallory and the DH began what seemed, beyond doubt, the prelude to confirmation of his prophecy. Pratt was struck speechless again.

A sudden frenzy seized the airplane. Cobb, who had watched suicidal flying in his time, had never witnessed anything like this. Jerking out of a steep bank, Mallory's ship dipped her blunt nose for as long as a man might count three. Then, roaring on the climbs, and screaming on the drops, she rushed around and around an invisible hub in a series of loops so fast and tight that, as near as Cobb could judge, she lost not a hundred feet of altitude in the course of six dizzy rounds.

After that it was a tarantella of death.

In a succession of tremendous zooms the DH bounded up the air, poised and plunged into a vertiginous spin. She fell like an arrow, her four wings fanning round the axis of the fuselage. Cobb expected the wings to tear loose any minute, for the DH is notoriously fragile. But the wings stuck, the spin stopped, and she zoomed again, to falter at the peak of the climb with clutching pinions spread, then slip back swiftly, tail first, until, like a falling rocket stick she whipped over and dove headlong, her rigging yelling.

Then ducking, doubling, rolling, spinning, zooming, looping, stalling, slipping—a panic-stricken winged monster in convulsions, dodging the pursuing specter of eternity, she seemed—she scrambled desperately about the pale unfriendly blue of the winter heavens. Like a frightened bat in a lighted room she fled from right to left and up and down, every movement an explosion of crazed energy. For the watchers on the ground it was difficult to realize the presence of a human being aboard her. She seemed to have acquired a soul of her own, possessed of a devil, that was driving her to self-destruction. Mallory, of course, was the mad soul—Mallory, running amuck in a red rage, venting the pent-up fury of months.

"It can't last another five minutes!" exclaimed Cobb. "He'll tear her to pieces! Does he think she's a Spad?"

"And nothing to do! Nothing to do!" groaned Prat.

"Nothing can save him," said Billy, "but the grace of God! He's living on borrowed time right now. Judas! Look at him roll her! Whoever heard—— Ah-h-h-h!"

It was a little cough, a faint deprecatory hiccup, that brought the exclamation. It dropped from the sky—from the DH leaping upward toward a wisp of cloud.

It came again—louder—punctuating precisely the steady hum of the straining engine.

And again!

And then the DH ceased to roar!

Cobb whirled and beat a tattoo of joy on the slight shoulders of his companion. "She's conked. By gosh, she's conked! There is a God!" he cried.

Pratt said nothing. He only stood and trembled in the revulsion of terror allayed.

And the DH, her engine stalled, her frenzy checked, came gliding down the long blue inclines, sweeping the turns with a steady lift as her pilot played the landing.

Briefly Cobb took his eyes from the airplane and swept them round the field.

There is something about mortal peril that subtly isolates not only the actors but the audience, if there be an audience. Watching Mallory tempt destruction, Billy Cobb had forgotten there was anybody in creation besides himself, the boy who trembled at his elbow, and the man in the ship above. Now that the menace of tragedy had miscarried he felt the need of reëstablished contact with his immediate world. And so, acting on unconscious impulse, he looked about to assure himself that what he had just witnessed had not occurred in pure space. Thus a man waking from a nightmare turns up the lights and stares about him, checking over familiar objects, seeking the comfort of reality again.

Up and down the bleak line of hangars men were silhouetted against the snow, some of them still transfixed as they followed the course of the DH, some of them looking about as Cobb was looking. He had not seen these men issue from their places of concealment. A moment ago the field had been half deserted. They had emerged in sudden silence and stood in dumb terror while the spectacle progressed. Through a rift between the hangars Cobb could see more men about the post huts. The place bristled with men, hatless, coatless, their breath feathering the freezing air. At some of the houses Cobb saw women, too. Langstrom Field had disgorged its dwellers. A contagion of panic had driven them out.

The question was, how had the field been warned of impending catastrophe. The sound of an airplane in flight must have been familiar enough to all these people. It is not customary for air folk to accord a unanimous ovation of eyes to every ship that leaves the ground. Normally Mallory's flight should have progressed without a gallery. Typewriters should have clattered unconcernedly; pens should have scratched without let; tools should have clinked, and snow shovels clumped. But the post, for as far as Cobb could see, had turned out bodily and gone into suspended activity. Only a couple of chubby urchins building a snow man over by the enlisted quarters seemed to have escaped the hypnotic fascination; the rest were only now emerging from the catalepsy of horrid apprehension as the reassuring whine of the DH's rigging broke the spell.

What had called them out so swiftly to that extraordinary manifestation of concern?

The answer materialized in the shape of a man. It was Fallon. He stepped onto the porch at headquarters and laid about him censoriously with his eyes.

The hoodoo of Langstrom!

And Cobb understood how that hoodoo hung like a pall over the spirit of the field, how these people, habituated to disaster, had come to live in momentary fear of it, so that at the first whisper of trouble every man's hair stood on end and every man braced himself for a shock. Cobb recalled now another time and another place when he too had spent his days going about his work half-handedly, with his eyes and his ears wide to catch the first movement, the first faint breath of tragedy. He remembered how, at that time and place, he used to greet his friends in the morning and wonder whether they would be there to bid him good night. Langstrom was like that—only worse, he thought.

The homing DH bespoke his attention again. She was winging round the last turn and into the final leg for the landing. Mallory had played his field perfectly. At an easy angle, the swish of the back draft through struts and wires sounding an even, confident note, she cleared the hangars with neat economy of space and dropped her tail as she skimmed the airdrome, settling gradually.

A groundsman—or a Fallon—would have turned his back, perhaps, at that point, and lost all interest. It looked so easy. From the wheels of the DH to the top of the thin blanket of snow was a scant drop of ten feet now. And ahead, for a clear half mile stretched the immaculate fairway of the field. Ignorance of the air—such ignorance as Fallon's, for instance—would count the landing safely made already.

But if Fallon had known the first principles of his trade he would have left the post streets ten feet deep in drifts rather than delay the clearing of landing ways on the airdrome.

The reason for this is not what you may suppose. Six inches of powdery snow are scarcely enough to upset a heavy ship at landing. The danger of snow has to do with one of the fundamentals of optics. The airplane pilot landing on a clear surface, like snow, has no visual aids to judgment of distance. There are no grass blades, no stones, no humps or ruts on which to run a line of perspective and base an estimate of speed and clearance. It is one of the axioms of the airman's craft that no one can land with assurance on clean snow. As long as the larger topographical features are within the pilot's visual focus he can judge distance. But as he approaches the surface these larger objects pass out of his narrowing perspective and there comes a time when all he can see, without casting his eyes to right or left, is a blank streak of white that slips by without offering any hold for the eye. There is no way for him to tell how fast he is moving past that streak or how far below it is. It may be ten feet and it may be three. It looks just the same from either distance.

The competent leader of airmen is full of intimate bits of vital knowledge such as this. But to Fallon the air was an eternal sphinx. Its secrets were its secrets to such an extent that he did not even suspect the existence of elements beyond his horizon. He thought of the air as he thought of everything: What you could see existed. What you couldn't see wasn't there. And he honestly believed—and would have told you in all sincerity, had you asked him—that he knew as much about the alien business to which he had hired himself as any man need know.

Cobb watched Mallory and the DH anxiously. He knew there was imminent possibility of trouble.

Having cleared the roofs of the hangars, Mallory's last landing guide was gone. The surface of the snow was perfectly clean. Not a weed nor a stick showed through it. From now on he must guess. And the experienced eye watching the ship as it skimmed the deceptive surface could read the signs of his puzzlement. At the ten-foot level he began to grope for the ground. The ship's tail rose a little—that was when he decided he must be a trifle high. But immediately he changed his mind, probably reflecting that it is better to flop from ten or fifteen feet than to drive head on into the ground. Accordingly the tail of the DH dropped smartly and she put five more feet between her wheels and solid safety. Thus for a second she whickered along, vacillating up and down in a strange bewildered fashion as her pilot's quandary communicated itself to her controls. Meanwhile her headway was running out fast. She began to falter and sag. Her pilot flung doubt to the winds and staked his chances on one play, right or wrong.

Cobb saw the tail flippers snap up the length of their course. Mallory had guessed wrong. Already too high, he had driven her higher.

"It's a crash!" said Billy, and started running.

It turned out to be not quite a crash. The shop word for what happened is "crack." Rearing like a frightened horse the DH hovered and clutched desperately with all four wings. Then she dropped asprawl, pancaking through twelve feet, and fanned up a cloud of snow to screen her humiliation as she spread herself on the frozen ground and flattened out with a shock and a rip and a snarl, broken and ignominious, her upflung tail quivering deprecatingly.

There was not even the saving spirit of tragedy to dignify her passing. For, as the snow mist cleared, revealing the prostrate remains, Mallory stepped unharmed from the cockpit—now resting its flooring on the earth—swept off his helmet, shoved his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, and struck an attitude of profane dissatisfaction.

And so that brief chapter of Langstrom's calvary under the hoodoo, opening with grim promise, closed with an anticlimax of merciful burlesque.

Red-faced, oil-and-sweat streaked, his ruddy hair damp and matted, Mallory turned disgustedly from the wreckage.

"And I suppose," said Billy Cobb, coming up panting and steaming, "you think that's just your rotten luck!"

"No," growled Mallory. "I think it's just my damn foolishness to let that man get my goat. I should have known better."

"What were you trying to do?" grinned Billy. "'End it all?'"

"No. Why? Did it look that way. Was I rough, or anything?"

"Rough!" gasped Cobb. "You turned the whole post out! Don't you know what you were doing?"

Mallory passed a hand over his eyes and stared vacantly.

"By gosh!" he said, "I don't believe I remember anything about it. I was just crazy mad. So I went up top and blew off."

"Well," said Cobb, "the next time you feel like that, take a gun and shoot yourself. It's quicker—and safer!"

"I know it," said Mallory. "I ought to know. The last adjutant, O'Hay, killed himself the way you say I almost did. Don't they know down in Washington it ain't safe to leave a man like Fallon at large on a flying field? I should think they'd know."

V.

Cobb's first official act as engineering officer was to usurp the functions of the administrative and operating departments combined. He assembled the ship crews and trouble shooters and sent them out with shovels to clear landing ways.

"I know it isn't our business," he said to Pratt, "but if we don't do it who will? There's too much of this 'not my business' stuff on this post. In this game, son, future trouble is everybody's business. Remember that. Now another thing." He led the way clear of the hangars as he spoke and pointed down the line toward the operations hut. "See that pole by the door of operations? What's that for? To fly the colors?"

"No, sir," said Pratt. "That's for the landing sock."

"Sure," said Cobb. "And where's the sock?"

"Why I—I don't know. I never noticed it was gone. It must have rotted and blown away. The hoop is still there."

"If I were C. O. of this post," said Cobb grimly, "the man responsible for the empty hoop on that pole would get a general court and lose his rating! I'd run him out of the service! That's a case of what you call homicidal neglect. How's a strange ship coming in here to know where the wind's from, eh? You haven't even got a landing T. Who's in charge of operations?"

"Well, Captain Blaise was. But he's gone and I guess they've detailed another like him. I haven't even heard who."

"All right. That's fine. We'll play at operations. You get hold of a rigger, son. Have him draw linen from supply and make a sock. Tell him it's to be flying on that pole at seven in the morning if he has to work all night. When you've done that, drag that wreck off the field. Now I'll look around and find some more trouble."

Billy Cobb had an eye for airplanes and airdromes like the eye of a sailor for ships and ports. It took in a great deal at a glance. What he saw as he passed from hangar to hangar and plane to plane would have escaped the notice of a groundsman. It was all under the surface. The feel and aspect of those shadowy canvas caverns with their silent ships told the story, rather than any physical details. There was no life in them. They were dead and static like houses whose folk have gone away—

or museums where objects long out of use rest in lifeless ranks beneath glass covers.

Dovetailed together the airplanes huddled in patent abandonment. The floors were swept ominously clean. Not a tool was in sight, not a scrap of waste, or an oil can, or a funnel, or a greasy suit of hard-used dungarees.

"If there's been ten hours' flying on this post since the last pay hops," muttered Billy, proceeding on his tour, "then I don't know a Bessoneau from a Martin Bomber."

Where airplanes fly there is busied disorder. Cobb had never seen a hospital ward more perfectly scrubbed and polished and arranged than the hangars of Langstrom. A Dutch housewife would have gloried in them. But to Billy they whispered stagnation, gloom, and fear.

In one of them he found a thing of real terror, a thing as deadly and as treacherous as a sleeping cobra. Significant too, eloquent of the enervation that sapped the spirit of Langstrom from end to end, for all its show of gaudy paint and brilliant shoes. It was a ship with the ignition switch left on! Now a DH does not start itself like a limousine. It must be primed by hand. The crew man must rotate the propeller until the gas is in the cylinders under compression. If he is thoughtless he may do this without checking the ignition switch. And the result is sometimes a dead crew man, sometimes a one-armed crew man, sometimes a man with no arms at all. As well throw yourself in the path of a circular saw as be surprised by a wild propeller.

Billy shook his head, recalling that two men had already been maimed in just this way at Langstrom. He snapped off the switch with a grunt. This was the sort of thing—the tragic fruit of sullen indifference—that gave rise to "happenings" at Langstrom. It was this that the hoodoo imposed on the field.

There were ten hangars to visit. He passed from one to another. In the last he found life. A man was there, muffled against the cold in an oil-stained fur-lined flying suit. He was moving fitfully about one of the ships, peering up, stooping down, testing the tension of wires, scrutinizing minute details like cotter keys and the safety wiring on turnbuckles.

As Cobb came in he straightened up to a full six feet three.

"Hello," said this giant, hunching his shoulders and peering down at the stumpy Billy.

"Hello," said Billy.

The big man's name was Kemp. "I was looking over the pay ship, here," he said. "Fallon makes me do it every day."

"The pay ship?" queried Billy. He knew all about the pay ship.

"Don't you know?" said Kemp. "It's the C. O.'s private crate. Reserved for pay hops only. And I'm the pay pilot. Get it?"

"H'm!" said Billy, shamming stupidity. "Ah, I see. He—er—lets you ride with him and get the benefit of his superior technique, eh?"

This sudden change of front caught Kemp off his balance. "Hunh?" he croaked. "Oh, yes. Yes, quite so. 'Superior technique' is good."

"I am told," said Billy, "that he can't fly. Is that so?"

"Well," said Kemp, "not strictly. He can hold a flying line in the air, and make a skidding turn. I wouldn't say he can't fly—a-tall. But he can't land. He never could."

"Ah," said Billy, leaning against a strut. "Nice state of affairs, eh? Does he work you hard?"

"Who, me? Listen, I'm the only man on this post he doesn't work. I wish he would. I'm fed up with loafing. Once a month I fly him—ten landings for pay. Half an hour, maybe. The rest of the time I read magazines and fuss with this crate. He won't even let me fly it—more'n to test it a couple times a month. And I don't dare go up in anything else. There's a jinx on every ship."

"I was just looking them over," said Cobb. "Beautiful sight. Like a wax-work exhibit."

"Yes. This is a fine museum, this field. I s'pose you like to fly, eh?"

"Now and then," said Cobb.

"Well you'll get over it. There's something about that man—he takes the sap out of you. He——"

"Why," said Billy innocently, "he treats *you* pretty well. Life of Riley, I'd say."

"I don't call it that. I'd like to do some flying. Besides, it ain't right to help that man pretend he's a flyer. It's robbing the government."

Billy pricked up his ears. He was finding out things that fitted in very nicely.

"And does he really pretend he can fly?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, sure. Look at the flying log. You'll see the entries there: 'Practice flight—Major Fallon, pilot—Lieutenant Kemp, observer.' They all read that way."

Billy was delighted. So he grunted disgustedly. Then he probed: "And I suppose he's very particular how you handle him up top, eh? Apt to be critical about slips and vertical turns and fishtails and such?"

"Oh, boy!" grinned Kemp. "He's as calm as a cat in a shower bath. One day I got careless and overshot the field. So I naturally started to slip her in. It was just a little slip, at that. I wasn't very far over. Say! He grabbed the stick and near broke it off crossing my control. I had to pull out and go around again. You should have heard him when we got back to the hangar!"

"I can imagine," said Billy.

"He was crazy! He had me arrested, court-martialed, and serving ten years at Leavenworth inside about thirty seconds."

"I can imagine," said Billy.

VI.

That night Billy wrote a letter that might have interested the big pay pilot. He walked three miles to the nearest village, and mailed it privately.

Then he went to a news-candy-tobacco-fruit shop and purchased an almanac.

It was ten o'clock when he answered the challenge of the guard at the outer gate and reëntered the post. Norris was in bed, smoking and reading, when Billy came into their cubicle and slipped off his overcoat.

Cobb held his stiff fingers to the oil stove.

"Where you been?" said Norris.

"To the big city," said Billy.

"What for?" said Norris.

"Well, I bought an almanac, but it's nobody's business."

"An almanac—— Oh, that! Well?"

"Well," said Billy, "there will be a moon—about four thirty—on the twenty-eighth—if there aren't any clouds."

"For goodness' sake, Bill!" explained Norris petulantly, "why the mystery?"

"Because, John, I don't want to make you an accessory before any facts—and don't want you forced to perjure yourself on my behalf if I'm dragged in chains to a **G. C. M.** What nobody knows can't hurt me. There's such a thing as a perfectly innocent act, you know, that becomes a high crime if criminal intent can be proved."

"All right. Only step soft, old son. This Fallon is no man's fool."

"The less a fool he is the less the howl he'll make. Read your book, John."

Norris was complying when there came a knocking at the door.

"Come in!" called Cobb; and Pratt, wrapped in a dressing gown, appeared. He looked very lorn and wretched.

"Do you mind?" he questioned hesitantly. "I—I was beginning to get on my own nerves."

"Of course not, son," said Norris. "Sit down. You look like somebody needing company."

The boy sat on the foot of Billy's cot. "You—you're sure I'm not bothering you?"

"Hell, no!" said Billy warmly. "Here!" Roll a cigarette. Spend the night if you want to."

"Thanks! Thanks a lot! I just wanted to—to get away from myself. And—and talk to somebody—somebody in his right mind. It's—it's a comfort!"

Having said he wanted to talk the boy fell silent. Norris lit his pipe and blew smoke whorls which he studied intently. All at once he fixed his eyes on Pratt and said:

"No! I wouldn't!"

"Huh?" gasped Pratt.

"I remarked," said Norris, "that I wouldn't do it if I were you."

"Why," stammered Pratt, "I—I didn't say anything—I didn't speak out loud just now, did I?"

"Of course not!" said Cobb. "What's the idea, John?"

Norris smiled. "I was just guessing, Bill."

"Guessing! Guessing what?"

"Guessing what Pratt was about to ask us—— Oh," he raised a deprecatory hand, "it was just a guess. I don't set up for a mind reader. But considering the general circumstances, and the way Pratt looks, and what you told me at supper, Bill, about the ruckus with Fallon this morning——"

"You know about that!" exclaimed Pratt.

"I decided," Norris went on unruffled, "that he was going to ask us if we didn't think he'd better resign and get out."

"Why," cried the boy, "so I was! But—but——"

"But," supplied Norris, "you were hesitating, after all. And so I thought I'd venture a guess—a guess, mind you—and help you to unload."

"If you don't beat the Dutch, John!" commented Billy.

"And I repeat," said Norris, addressing Pratt, "I wouldn't do it. Emphatically not!"

"But you don't know," said the boy, "you don't know what a case I am. This afternoon I tried to fly—and—and——" He gulped at the memory.

"You couldn't make yourself, eh?" supplied Norris.

Pratt nodded miserably. "I told that—that man—Major Fallon—it would come to this? He said—he said—'Bosh!'"

"I heard him, dammim!" snorted Cobb.

"And so, because you couldn't fly this afternoon, you think you ought to resign," said Norris. "Well, *I* don't think so!"

"I should say not!" agreed Billy.

"But what good am I? And—and I have dreams. I want to get away from this place. It's like being haunted—living here where everything reminds you——"

"There," soothed Norris. "That's not the real trouble. You could stand it, but you think you're done with flying forever—and so you don't see the use. That's where the rub comes. But, pshaw! You'll fly again. Listen, I've been through it all. I know."

"You?" said Pratt. "You've had dreams—and tried to fly, and couldn't? Why, I didn't think you——"

"Shucks, boy! It's only the exceptions, like Cobb, who haven't been there—more or less. But you do seem to have an extra sharp attack. Well, so did I. I even sent my resignation in. But a friend of mine—an older man—got hold of it while it was going through the channels. And he held it out until I was cured, and——"

"Cured!" Pratt caught him up. "What cured you?"

"Flying, son—the hair of the dog, you know. There were—circumstances; and I had to fly. It was forced on me. What cured me will cure you."

"N-no-o-o!" shuddered Pratt. "N-no-o. You don't understand—you don't know—you can't! I don't dare think of it. To-day finished me! It isn't that I'm afraid of anything in particular. I'm just plain afraid—of everything and nothing! It's dream, dream, dream, all night long, and dread, dread, dread, every minute I'm awake. The sound of an engine makes me sick at my stomach. I'd as lief climb into a cage with a wild tiger as get up top with a DH. I can reason about it. But it's no good. It's like there was a hoodoo in the air. Something seems to keep saying to me, 'This'll be your last flight, bird!'"

"Sure," said Norris. "I know. Listen and see if I don't. For instance, somebody whistles Chopin's 'Funeral March' and you take that as a sure sign that you're going to crash the next time you lift a wing. You write a letter to a friend, and then you say to yourself, 'That's probably the last that bird will ever hear from me!' You get up with a headache on the day you planned a hop; and you decide that's a warning not to fly on that day. But you fly anyway, maybe; because you're ashamed to give in; and the nervous strain lays you out for forty-eight hours. Perhaps you read in a paper that somebody's been killed down at Kelly Field, and you see in that a foretaste of what's going to be in the papers about you pretty soon. Finally you can't open your eyes without seeing signs and omens. And the fact that they fail, one after another, makes no difference. You keep right on reading death messages in every ambiguous trifle that crosses your mind. Am I right? Do I know?"

"You—you have felt that way, too?"

"Have I? Oh, Lord! And how it goes on dinging in your brain, over and over again, night and day. But you'll notice this—once you're in a ship and off the ground you feel better. You don't feel right, I grant. But better. The reality of tackling what you're afraid of isn't half as bad as thinking about tackling it. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, that's so. The hump is in getting started."

"Like everything else," continued Norris. "Nothing is as good or as bad when you reach it as your imagination paints it. Realization always falls short of anticipation. Look here! You mustn't quit. You'll regret it all your life. There will always be that twinge when you remember that you ran out under fire. Justification? You've got plenty of justification. It's a crying wonder the entire flying staff of this field hasn't resigned. But you'll never quite believe yourself justified. The little twinge will stick with you. I know some who quit—and they've told me. What you need is flying—lots of it. You think you're through. I think you're not. Remember, until now you've had no one to *make* you fly."

"But—but—who've I got now? Unless you——"

A new voice broke in.

"Leave it to me, son!" That was Billy Cobb—Billy the practical—capping theory with the word of action. "Leave it to me!" he said again.

Doubting, but hoping against doubt, the boy went off to bed at last.

"John," said Billy, "if you had all the authority in the world, and you wanted to make that man Fallon holler quits, what would you do to him?"

"Stop his flying pay, of course," said Norris promptly.

"You think that would do it—sure?"

"He'd quit like a shot. He hates this game."

"I'm glad we agree on that. Now tell me something else. When does he take his pay hops?"

"Well, you can count on one of the last days of the month. He waits till the eleventh hour, puts it off the way you'd stall a dentist date."

"Ah! And has he ever, to your knowledge, flown with anybody but Kemp?"

"Not at Langstrom! Not on your life! He thinks the rest of us are a bunch of dubs.'

"Great! I'll sleep like a top."

VII.

In the shivering gray of the winter morning Pratt woke to a pounding on his door. He heard Cobb's voice: "Turn out there!"

"Yes, sir!" he groaned and crawled wretchedly from his comforting blankets and wretchedly into his icy clothes.

Presently, in his flying gear, he stumbled out to the hangars. Cobb was there ahead of him, doling out the day's assignments to the crews.

"Well," said Billy, "I see they've got the sock flying. And the weather's dandy. What say? Shall we hop after breakfast?"

"I—I leave it to you," chattered Pratt as a chill shook him.

"That's settled," said Billy cheerfully. "Now, about a ship. How's that 63?"

Pratt nodded. All ships were one with the devil to him. "Sixty-three's as good as any, I guess. She's a new job, at least."

"Make it 63," said Billy. "Run her out and look her over. And have some water heating to thaw the pump, mind!"

"Yes, sir," said Pratt, his teeth playing like castanets.

"See you at breakfast," said Billy and went off to the club.

But though he dawdled over his coffee, waiting, Pratt did not join him. If he had known more about air nerves he wouldn't have spent so much time at table. A man in Pratt's state of mind does not eat. It is said that condemned murderers often gorge themselves before they face the gibbet or the chair. They must be a hardy lot.

Out on the hangar line, with drawn face, dilated eyes, and knees that trembled when he stood still, the boy went about the preparation of 63. He was in a reasonless agony. Half the night he had lain awake arguing and fighting with himself. Then he had fallen asleep, to continue the struggle in his dreams. His disease had grown on him through the passing hours.

Air nerves are a glorified form of worry. And like most forms of worry they have their source in the imagination rather than the lucid brain. You can reason as much as you will with them. They are not amenable to the conscious processes of thought. They lurk beneath the surface, ambushed in the subconscious.

Like the dark—that frightens high-strung children—and the sea and the desert that fill primitive men with dread, the air is a bodeful, secret empire. Civilized man is no longer easily terrorized by the dark, the sea, or the haunted wastes of barren sand and rock, because ages of familiarity have bred confidence. He knows the worst these immemorial demesnes of fear can bring against him. But the air is new. The airman has no heritage of confidence. He is an easy prey to its mystery. He sees it strike and kill—and wonders why—and cannot always find the answer. Fear enters him like a secret poison, multiplies in his veins, and takes command of reason. He is as helpless against it as the child who fears the dark. Even though he knows—as the child knows—that his fear is foolish.

Thus fear had come to Langstrom. Thus it had come to Pratt. He had seen the air kill once too often. For each of the killings he could find answers and half answers in terms of the practical. But for all of them together he could find no answer. Why should men die so fast at Langstrom—and at Langstrom alone? The answer was Fallon, of course. But from that sprang a myriad of corollaries so numerous and diverse that without perspective they became confused and misty. After a time it began to appear to Pratt and the others of Langstrom that Fate perversely pointed a finger and struck their fellows down out of all logic. And so the hoodoo was conceived and brought forth.

They ceased trying to reason and only wondered. What they wondered was: "When will it be my turn?" And each imagined he must be the next. Only three, of all the field, had escaped a touch at least of the poison. They were Norris, Mallory, and Kemp. Cobb's arrival made the number four.

Fallon himself, of course, had always been afraid. But he would have been afraid of anything with power to kill, anywhere. And he had safeguarded himself. So that in his case fear amounted to nothing more than a monthly qualm, soon over, and well repaid. He did not have to live with it night and day, waiting the arbitrary order that would send him to his death. He had not fallen victim to the horror that his own influence had loosed.

Cobb returned at length and found Pratt on his back in the snow under the tail surfaces of 63. He was checking over safety wires and cotter keys.

"Here," said Billy. "I'll do that. Why didn't you come to breakfast? Dash in and fill up."

Pratt rolled clear of the empennage and stood up, dusting off the snow.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm not especially hungry."

"Not hungry!" said Cobb. "In this weather? What's the matter?" He peered sharply at Pratt's drawn face. "Oh," he said, comprehending as well as a man may comprehend fear who has never known it, "has it got your appetite?"

"I—I guess it has, sir," stammered Pratt pitifully.

"Gosh!" said Billy suddenly. "Your teeth are chattering. You'd better go in the shop and hug the stove a while. Well, we'll fix that up. It'll all be over soon. They won't be chattering this time next week, eh?"

He heard the boy catch his breath sharply.

"Now I wonder what struck him then?" mused Cobb as Pratt huddled off toward the shop.

Norris could have explained. Norris had suffered air nerves. The boy had twisted Billy's hopeful forecast into one of those black omens of which Norris had spoken.

"'All over soon!'" mumbled Pratt affrightedly. He dragged into the warm, oily refuge of the shop and dropped onto a cracker box beside the stove. There for many ages he sat and strove to separate those inept words from the fatality they suggested.

A giant outside broke into a spasm of coughing and Pratt began to tremble violently. The engine of 63 had started!

The coughing gave place to a loud liquid purring. Sixty-three was warming up. Pratt sat and shook while the purring mounted minute by minute until it burst into a strident din that rattled the windows and shook the rafters of the hut. Presently the thundering fell off and the purring was resumed. Then the door opened and Cobb, in fur-lined dungarees and helmet, waddled in.

"Come on," he said, patting the boy's shoulder with a gauntleted hand. "She's got a sweet engine. Listen to her!"

Pratt rose quaking to his feet and pulled on his helmet. "L-let's go," he gulped, and started. His throat was full of ashes and his lips were cardboard. "C-come on!" he added, quickening his uncertain step. "If we don't start qu-quick I'll never make it."

With the blocks at her wheels and two mechanics to hold her, stick and tail, the DH stood waiting. All around, the ground was blown clear by the blast of her high-speed torque, for the snow lay dry like white dust that scatters at a breath. She squatted impatiently, her blunt snout aimed at the ridgepole of the nearest Bessoneau, her propeller flashing a leisurely disk in the pale winter sunlight. A black, unfriendly, frigid monster she appeared to Pratt—a sort of bloodless beast, quivering and chuckling with homicidal eagerness. When he came round her wing and into the mild backwash that drifted down her pulsing flanks and out across the white field, where it kicked up little puffs and dervishes of snow dust, Pratt flinched and stumbled as though struck by an icy fist. He had to clutch the coaming of the rear cockpit to steady himself.

The mechanic who sat at the after controls went overside at a wave from Cobb. Scarcely conscious what he did, Pratt clambered feebly up the fuselage and fell into his seat. There he crouched in stupid fascination staring at the instruments on the board, the control stick between his knees, the rudder bar at his feet, the ignition switches and the throttle arm in its quadrant by his elbow.

He found the ends of the safety belt and closed the buckle at his waist. Then he was aware that Cobb had settled in the forward seat, between the wings. Dimly he could see the top of his flying mate's helmet projecting a little above the stream-lined decking over the gas tank. This was some years ago, and DHs then were built with the tank between the front and rear cockpits.

"Clear away," sounded a voice, and the ship hitched forward an inch as the blocks left the wheels.

The DH began to pivot, a crew man dragging back at one wing while Cobb jazzed the engine with quick thrusts at the throttle. The hangars revolved out of sight; the white field, scarred with landing ways, swung into view; then Cobb's voice called again above the engine's pur:

"All clear?"

"All clear, sir," the crew chief's answer.

A waving arm above the forward cockpit wigwagged the signal of release. The crew dropped back from the wings. A roaring swelled from the exhaust manifolds as the throttle slipped the bridle, and 63, with the west wind in her teeth and a baby blizzard trailing aft, flung the field behind her, leaped and rode the air shouting.

Trees and houses appeared and dropped away. Then Pratt, braced apprehensively in the back seat, gasped as 63 stood smartly on the tip of a wing and scurried halfway round a circle, righting smoothly to sail on level keel back across the field and the post with a thousand feet between her wheels and solid earth.

Cobb, up front, waited until Langstrom had passed astern. Then he closed the radiator screen and drew the throttle back until the needle on the rev counter had crawled from fifteen hundred down to five. The ship's nose dropped a foot and her wires sang on a rising note as she picked up speed.

Boldly then Billy swung the stick, and Pratt, clenching his teeth and gripping the coaming, felt the sickening lift and roll of the fast wing-over that flung her about to the back track. He closed his eyes and tried to move his cardboard lips. A freshening blast of stinging wind beat suddenly against his cheek. Affrightedly his eyes flew open.

His heart skipped a beat. The earth seemed to be standing on edge. The ship was going down like water over a cliff in a vertical side slip!

It was more than the boy could stand. Instinct took command of brain and nerves; how it happened he never remembered in detail, but presently he found his feet on the rudder bar, the stick in his hands, and the DH coasting smoothly, with the earth beyond her nose again and the sky overhead where it was made to be. He had broken the stringent rule of the air. He had crossed his pilot's control and taken the ship in hand!

Pratt knew, as every pilot knows, that crossing controls is unpardonable. It is a trick that has ended in death repeatedly. To one life that it has saved by the redemption of bad flying judgment, it has taken toll of ten. For with two men fighting each other at stick and bar there is anarchy aboard. And gravity steps in to work its will unhindered.

He glanced forward quickly, and moved the stick to call Cobb's attention. The ship bobbed gently, rising and falling by the head like a dinghy in a steamer's wake.

Billy was waiting for this. Now he set one gloved hand firmly on the throttle quadrant, then twisted half around and grinned reassuringly at the white-faced boy behind, nodding and raising his free arm to show that he had surrendered control.

Pratt shook his head quickly and threw up both hands. Billy followed suit. The ship, left to her own devices, promptly raised her nose and fell away by the wing. Billy kept his hands high, whereat Pratt's disappeared suddenly and the ship settled back to a fast straight glide. Cobb replaced his left hand on the throttle quadrant and kept the other raised.

Then Pratt understood that he must make the landing. He reached for the throttle to jazz the engine. It was blocked! From zero to five hundred it would move. But five hundred was the limit of its course. Linked as it was to the forward arm it could not pass the point where Billy's hand checked its play.

Pratt was stricken. He shook the stick and glared at the back of Billy's head. But he got no answer. The altimeter showed nine hundred feet and the field was rushing up and past them. They were overshooting. At the rate 63 was traveling she would touch earth well beyond the airdrome, in the rough!

A crack at the least, thought the boy. A crash in all probability! And the throttle jammed! No chance now to swing around and play the field again. The landing must be made directly and without miscalculation. The sweat oozed under the rim of his helmet and trickled down his face, for all the freezing wind. That blocked throttle! Obviously Cobb knew nothing of it. He was counting on the engine to redeem mistakes. But the engine was useless now. Five hundred revolutions were no good at all. Pratt fought with the throttle. It wouldn't budge. He closed it then and yelled, "The throttle's jammed! Take the stick, for God's sake!"

But the leather-sheathed head up front gave no sign and the raised arm made no move. Pratt screamed his warning once more. Cobb paid no attention.

A sob rose in the boy's throat. He choked it back and got to work. Peering quickly overside he picked out the slender thread of a landing way across the field. The altimeter read six hundred now, and the field was all but under the wheels and slipping back and out of reach by the second.

Necessity galvanized his nerve. He flung the stick to the right and kicked the rudder bar. The DH veered sharply on a new tack. Then, holding his breath he threw her steeply to the left. Again and again, as fast as the ship would handle, he threw her from tack to tack. Thus, weaving right and left, like a lugger beating up the wind for the entrance to a narrow harbor channel, the DH marked time down the air, losing altitude and saving distance.

Once Pratt let his eye rove from the groundward goal and he glimpsed Cobb's head in movement. It was nodding in approval. A spark of confidence took fire in his breast. He glued his eye to the mark again and played the zigzag course. Holding back, urging forward, he edged the DH down to port and safety.

Now the hangars loomed life size. A last tug at the stick, a last nudge of the bar, and 63 swung in above those canvas reefs. Neatly she cleared them, veered a trifle as they swept behind, straightened—and took the landing way dead in the eye!

Pratt sighed thankfully. Sixty-three whickered along under headway. She began to sag. Pratt dropped the tail a notch and she clutched the air again. Again she sank. Again he dropped the tail and again she clung. Another sag—and he yanked the stick to his stomach. There followed a rumbling as her axles took the weight from her wings and her tail skid scored the frozen ground. She slowed to a halt, gurgling liquid congratulations through her manifolds.

"You see?" shouted Cobb down the fuselage—he had climbed to his knees on the front seat. "That was perfect!"

"Yes," said Pratt, sitting limp and perspiring with something like the light of religious fervor in his haggard eyes, "God was with us! Did you know the throttle was jammed? I might have killed you."

"Not quite," grinned Billy. "I jammed it myself."

"You! Wha-what for?"

"I just wanted you to see for yourself how good you are!"

"Well, I'll—I'll be damned!" gasped Pratt. "Judas, I was scared!"

"Sure!" said Billy. "At nothing. See? I could have taken over any time. But I didn't want you to know it—you'd have let go then. And I wanted you to run the works, see?"

"Gosh!" grunted Pratt. "You had a lot of faith in me!"

"Sure I had. *I* knew you were all right. And now you know it yourself. Just taxi her around and do your stuff some more."

"I—I—— Gosh! I'm all weak now, sir!" demurred the boy.

"Shucks! You're not going to quit—now?"

Pratt squared his shoulders and straightened his wabbly spine painfully.

"You're the doctor," he said, and reached for the throttle.

The crew came out and escorted them back to the line.

"Now," said Billy, when 63's blunt nose

pointed the fairway again, "your dish is landings—lot's of 'em. Make about twenty in a row. Then we'll see."

Off, up, around, and down. Again and again. Pratt flew well. His take-offs were clean and fast, his turns firm and suave, his judgment of air distance sure—albeit not so hair-line fine as Billy's—and his landings nicely polished off.

They had completed their tenth hop and returned to the take-off line when Billy signaled for a halt, climbed to the ground, and sent a crew man to bring a bag of sand ballast.

"Now," he said, pulling himself up beside the boy, while the mechanic fussed with the ballast in the front seat. "I'll stay below and watch you solo. You're all set, ain't you?"

Pratt bit his under lip and gyrated the stick nervously. Hesitating fearfully he sighted up the fuselage and through the mist of the spinning prop to the pale sky beyond. Then:

"All right!" he said huskily, and shut his teeth on the words. Behind his goggles his eyes were big and pitiful with terror.

"Good boy!" said Billy and slapped his shoulders. "You'll do fine."

But Cobb was too sanguine.

He heard the roar of the engine subside halfway out the fairway. In mid-charge the DH lost speed, dropped her tail, crept to a halt, swung about, and came back with reluctant, disgusted snorts. Pratt averted his head as he drove her past the line and up to her hangar.

There he left her.

"What's the matter?" puffed Billy, hurrying up as fast as the snow underfoot and his flying gear would let him. "What in time d'you do that for, kid?"

"I—I d-don't know!" gulped the boy, lifting his goggles and fumbling with the strap of his helmet. "I wish to God I did know!" he almost sobbed.

"Oh!" said Billy flatly. "I thought something was wrong with the ship."

"No, sir!" Pratt's eyes sought Billy's feet. "It was something wrong with me. I—I was—like, paralyzed. I couldn't take her off. I *couldn't*." His voice was almost a wail. "I'm just yellow—just a quitter!"

Billy looked away. Pratt's face was painful to see. "Don't you believe it, kid!" mumbled Billy, embarrassed and puzzled. Any man who could fly as well as Pratt and who didn't dare was more than he could understand.

VIII.

"It's the hoodoo," said Norris, when Billy put it up to him.

"But shucks, John, I took him up and showed him there was nothing to it."

"Well, that's my explanation. Don't accept it if you don't want to."

"He wasn't paralyzed while I was with him."

"A child isn't frightened in the dark when his father holds his hand, either. Pratt's just gotten an inexplicable notion—you have to take lots of inexplicable things for granted in our business, Bill—that the hoodoo doesn't go for you. That's some progress, anyway. Don't give him up, Bill. He's worth saving."

"I wasn't going to. He's a funny case, but he's a good kid."

It was two or three days later that the post began to pay particular attention to the unprecedented activities of the new engineering officer and the word went about that he was unusually full out—not only an insatiable and indefatigable flyer, but a marvelous technician with the stick—a veritable virtuoso.

Now an insatiable flyer at Langstrom, in the days of the hoodoo, was curiosity enough. But Billy Cobb rated higher than a curiosity. He took rank as a thundering miracle. This was not because he flew every day, and twice a day, but because he flew in a particularly striking way.

Most of his flying consisted in short hops around the field—*and all his landings were made without recourse to the throttle!*

There were times when he would reel off twenty landings in rapid series. Then again he would lengthen the periods of his sojourns in the air and reduce the number of landings. Sometimes they would see him climbing his ship in great circles up the heavens until it became a dot. Then the engine would be hushed, and the high wail of the wires would sound through the post as the long glide started. The engine would not sound again until the ship had drifted in and come to a halt, always precisely in the same spot. The spot was a thirty-foot circle cleared through the snow in the center of the field!

No matter where the wind was from, or how strong or how weak it was, no matter from what angle or altitude the glide was started, Cobb's ship always halted within the circumference of that tiny clearing. And he never used his engine to redeem his judgment!

The post was amazed. Men began laying wagers that within so and so many days Cobb would miss a landing by so and so many feet—or use his engine. But February wore on. And the only bets paid were those that backed his skill. He never missed.

Norris, of all Langstrom, was not astounded. He knew Billy's flying biography from the day it began. He knew that Cobb had not missed a landing by thirty feet since his cadet days. He could have cleared a small fortune on the strength of this knowledge.

"I'll lay you any odds in reason," Mallory pleaded with him once.

"Can't bet," said Norris. "It's a sure thing."

Mallory spread this about. And in due course Fallon began to take note of what was going on, even Fallon who never looked toward the field excepting to find fault.

Fallon had sometimes wondered what he would do if he were suddenly deprived of Kemp. It was his belief that no flyer—no regular flyer—could justify a longevity expectation of more than a hand span of years. Not only that, but Kemp might fall ill, or be relieved, or get the wind-up. So many things could happen to a man like Kemp. Therefore it occurred to Fallon—after the cooling of his instinctive resentment that any flyer of his command should dare to show spirit—that he had best keep an outwardly benevolent eye on Cobb.

A phenomenon who could land consistently without recourse to the throttle on a thirty-foot bull's-eye—a man, moreover who flew as carefully and sanely as Billy always flew, and who, to boot, was reputed a past master of engines and rigging—might very well, it struck Fallon, serve to stop an awkward gap some day.

"What do you think of him?" he asked Kemp bluntly after he had reached this conclusion. "Good, isn't he?"

They were standing by the pay-ship hangar one gloomy mid-February afternoon, watching Billy run off his daily string of bull's-eyes under the lowering clouds that threatened more snow.

"He's the best on the field," Kemp declared generously. "He's the best I've ever seen."

"Yourself excepted," suggested Fallon, watching the DH hover across the snow and creep to the center of the target.

"No, sir," said Kemp warmly. "Look! Ain't that a bird! What an eye he's got! No, sir, I mean bar none. Shucks, I don't fly in his class, I guess."

"H'm!" commented Fallon.

But he had no notion of changing pilots—yet. Kemp would do. Besides, it would wrench his vanity to establish flying relations with a new man. He had no real pride. But his vanity was monstrous. Even between Kemp and himself he demanded an absurd play of outward pretense.

Fallon built his life and his philosophy on appearances. He might be no flyer, but since it was part of the standard formula of his office he pretended he was one. Even to himself, it must be supposed, he pretended he was a flyer—excepting in the air!

"H'm!" he repeated. "I used to be pretty good myself—before my eyes began to trouble me, you know. But I don't think I was quite as good as Cobb, even at my best."

Whereat Kemp thought he heard a voice calling and turned suddenly to peer into the murky recess of a hangar, his face a picture of mirth and indignation in conflict.

Fallon left him, with that, and heaved his heavy way toward headquarters.

Later this choice morsel was retailed to Cobb by the obfuscated Kemp. Billy found it more interesting than funny. It meant that Fallon was nibbling the bait.

For you mustn't suppose that Cobb flew those weary daily rounds without a special end in view. Flying of that kind, round and round the same old hub, soon acquires a treadmill monotony. Billy was not enjoying himself. He was working hard.

IX.

The 'teens of February began to run short. A brief thaw set in and bogged the field. A light snowfall followed. And on the heels of the snow came another clear cold snap that brought—in the bright skies toward evening—a swelling crescent moon.

The business of the engineering department picked up notably, sign, at Langstrom, that the month was waning and that pay hops were in order. One by one the pilots of the post, most of them with dread in their eyes, dragged reluctant feet out to the cold reaches of the airdrome—where they seldom ventured—and, as Mallory poetically phrased it, "hopped for pay in the fear of God."

There were three crack-ups, attributable to overcontrol at the landings; which comes from a disease known as "ground shyness;" which comes from nervous fear. But no bones were broken.

Billy had a scant fifteen men to handle the increased traffic and the wreckage. He was kept busy. But he found time to carry on with his persistent schedule of aërial sharpshooting and to continue the air work with Pratt.

The boy was more than Cobb could fathom. He seemed ready now—even eager, at times—to fly with his mentor. But there was no evidence that he was any nearer braving his problem single-handed than on the day Billy first took him in charge with such high confidence of a speedy cure.

As a matter of fact Pratt was as much an enigma to himself as he was to Cobb. And much more of a burden. He suffered intensely from the blows dealt him by his pride and his conscience.

One evening, closeted with Norris and Billy, he burst out: "It's not right! You fly yourself blue in the face for me. And what good is it?"

"Chuck it, kid!" growled Billy, who was weary. "As long as I'm willing, what's it to you?"

"A whole lot. All this is just a damned pretense. I'm paid to fly—and you earn my pay for me because I can't earn it myself. It's not right. I ought to admit that my nerve is gone for good—and quit. I'm a kiwi—a dog-goned parasite."

Norris took a hand. "Listen, son," he advised, "you're too hard on yourself. There's more to your case than just nerves. I have been thinking—Billy knows I have queer, crazy notions that sometimes work out—that if you had gotten into this fix a couple of hundred years ago, there would have been talk about witchery. Your friends might have got it in their heads that you had fallen under a spell."

"Pshaw!" snorted Cobb.

"Shut up, Bill!" said Norris, and went on with his absurd metaphysics. "Nowadays we know better—we are very wise. We don't take stock in such stuff, eh? Yet look at this post. It's under a spell, isn't it? You can't deny it. The whole kit and caboodle have gone all of a hoo-haw—bar two or three. Make the best of it and there's still bad medicine in the air, eh? You aren't alone in your trouble. I can name you twenty others. There's bad medicine, I tell you. And what you fear is the medicine. You think it's nerves. But it's the medicine. One bright morning you'll wake up to find it's gone—blown out, like that!" Norris snapped his fingers. "The worst spells can be conjured you know." Here he glanced sharply at Billy. "Wait a while. Just a little longer."

Pratt shook his head and tried to look respectful at the same time. It sounded like nonsense to him.

But Cobb had caught his roommate's drift. He nodded.

"John talks too much in parables," he said, "but he frequently knows what he's talking about."

"But—but you told me flying would cure me, too," observed Pratt. "I tried to believe you then. But it hasn't, you see."

"Yet, you're not afraid to fly when Bill's along," Norris pointed out. "He's the charm against the spell—see?"

"Oh!" said Pratt. He didn't see at all.

One evening Billy left the post again. He sent a telegram this time. And the next night, after dinner, an orderly brought a dispatch to Mallory at the club.

The adjutant read it, sat up alertly, rubbed his eyes, grinned maliciously, and hurried out. Presently there was the sound of "language" in Fallon's quarters.

An hour after that a light truck rattled out the main gate in the moonlight and off through the white countryside. Beside its driver sat a gigantic young man wearing a happy, albeit somewhat bewildered smile. Behind bumped and rattled a pair of suit cases, a locker trunk, and a bed roll.

In the morning following it was observed by some that Kemp was not at breakfast. Norris particularly called this to the attention of Billy Cobb. And Mallory coming to table a moment later conveyed the official news.

"You should have seen Fallon's face when he read the order!" he gloated. "He'd have phoned Washington to get it revoked. But there wasn't time. Order was explicit and urgent. Kemp was to report to Benchley in person at nine this morning. And he had just time to make the train connections."

"Funny!" commented Norris.

"Yes," said Billy innocently. "If we didn't know that nobody in Washington gives a hoot, it'd look like some one had planned it deliberately to get him out in a sudden hurry before Fallon could use him for pay hops again."

Norris caught Cobb's eye. But Billy stared back at him over the rim of his coffee cup without a trace of guile.

"Bill," said Norris, "you know something."

"Me?" said Billy. "Unh-unh!"

"Besides," said Mallory, "if that were Washington's game, it wouldn't work. You've been spreading yourself too much with those fancy landings, Bill. Fallon's got his eye on you."

"Hell!" prevaricated Billy. "Do you think so? Gosh, I hope not!"

The blow fell that afternoon. Fallon was brief, with the briefness of embarrassment. As he outlined the assignment Billy was pay pilot plenipotentiary. He could do pretty much anything he pleased without transgressing any tenet overtly expressed. Of course, Fallon understood that Billy understood what the program would be. It never once occurred to him that his new flying aid would dare play horse with his sacred person. Cobb looked so mild and placid.

X.

Following Cobb's assignment to the vacant shoes of Kemp bad weather set in. But the forecasts held out hope. And there were still three days to the end of the month when the clouds rolled out to sea, the temperature dropped, and Langstrom shivered again under blue sky and the breath of a light keen breeze from north of west.

Fallon woke that morning with a start and a shudder. Sunlight streamed into his window. And as he struggled to consciousness somebody out by the hangars opened a throttle. The belated pay hoppers were already at it. Fallon knew of nothing in life more disagreeable and startling than the matin song of an engine. The dreadful racket wrung his nerves distressfully, particularly toward the end of each month. For then it confronted him with an evil imminence.

He got hastily from bed and shut his window to soften the menacing note of the engine. At times like this he often wondered if the candle justified the game. But with the comforting courage begot of bacon, eggs, and coffee he contrived to face the day's distasteful business with a resolute eye on cash percentages.

He sent for Cobb and inquired if 09—that was the numerical designation of the pay ship—were ready.

"I can have her for you in an hour, sir," promised Billy.

"Good!" said Fallon, thinking to himself that it was not good at all, and wishing heartily that Kemp were back. "We'll take off at eleven."

Then he turned to the morning routine—and sat in idleness staring at a specter. He didn't like this business of changing pilots. Cobb was all right, of course. But Kemp had been such a comfortable habit.

His desk phone rang. It was Cobb.

"Sorry, sir," he heard Billy saying. "But the radiator's sprung quite a leak. I'd advise a replacement—to be perfectly safe. I can do the job and be ready by three thirty—four at the latest. The air'll be steadier then, too."

This came to Fallon, haunted by apprehension, as a reprieve. He felt cheered, too, that the new pay pilot should be so solicitous about air-tight repairs and flying conditions.

"All right," he called back. "Make it four o'clock."

Billy proceeded to direct the removal of 09's punctured radiator. If Fallon had known anything about the mechanical history of his ship he might have done some pregnant wondering at the sudden failure of a radiator that had seen less than three hours' active service.

He fretted through the long day—which was lengthened by the discovery that he had no appetite for lunch—bolstering his courage by bullying whatever crossed his path, and going out of his path to find targets for his spleen when the fortuitous supply failed. Mallory was fit for a strait-jacket long before that day was over.

At four o'clock precisely, Billy telephoned that 09 was repaired, tested, and under power on the line.

Fallon leaned to the transmitter and talked softly.

"I'll be out in five minutes. And, oh, Cobb!"

"Yes, sir?"

"I've a touch of liver this afternoon. You will fly her—er—unofficially—unless I should feel like taking over. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll make it ten short hops—the shorter the better. And—you're sure of everything, Cobb? You'll be careful?"

"I'm always careful, sir."

"Good! You can stand by."

Langstrom Field was a fine sight when Fallon, bulging grotesquely in his thick dungarees, with the unbuckled tabs of his helmet flapping on his pendulous, somewhat pallid cheeks in time with his heavy tread, waddled up to 09.

The fairway spread silver white in the slanting rays of the late sun. The brown hangars glowed a cold, dull gold. There was only a touch of wind, and the voices of a pair of ships, swimming high in the deep bright sky, sang on a smooth untroubled note a song of lofty leisure.

The pay ship, with the gleaming mist of her spinning prop like a halo round her prow, stood at the blocks before her shed purring and muttering comfortably and rocking ever so little from wheel to wheel with cadenced energy.

Off to the west above the hills a rack of flaming clouds swam in a yellow sea. And from the east, across the backs of the glowing canvas sheds, buoyed on the violet surge of coming dusk, a gibbous moon peered coldly.

It was a spacious scene, a scene of suave, unheated beauty. There is something about an airdrome akin to the feel of the open sea; something tense, something expectant, something broad and hinting of adventure, of remote romance, that carries the mind into blue wind-swept spaces beyond the bounds of reality and above the limitations of familiar life

Billy Cobb, smoking a cigarette and waiting calmly by the quivering flank of the pay ship, was savoring this. But Fallon, bustling up nervously, felt nothing of it. He had never felt it. There was no music for him in the windy anthem of a winging ship; there was no incense in the reek of castor oil and gas; and the outflung sweep of the snow-laid airdrome voiced no call.

Billy saw him coming and cast the cigarette from his lips. He turned to the crew chief in the rear cockpit and questioned: "Got your time log handy?"

"Got it in my pocket, sir," said the chief. Then Fallon joined them.

Billy rendered the honors punctiliously and announced: "All clear, sir."

"Let's hurry then," said Fallon brusquely. "Hop out of there, you!" This was to the crew chief.

The mechanic vaulted overside and Fallon, with a lift from Billy, scrambled in. The crew man stood with time log in hand and pencil poised, his eyes on Cobb.

"Major Fallon, pilot," Billy directed. And the man wrote. "Lieutenant Cobb, observer," Billy went on. Then, to Fallon: "That right, sir?"

"Right!" grunted Fallon. And so it was logged and witnessed. Fallon was the pilot of record, by his own mandate!

Billy went up between the wings and into his seat.

"Want to test her, sir?" he called back when he was settled.

"Sure," growled Fallon importantly. "Always give 'em a run before I fly 'em." This for the benefit of the crew. Then he shot the throttle with a jerk that made Billy and the crew men shudder; and the pay ship almost broke from the blocks. Airplanes and airplane engines do not love brutality any more than men. The engine coughed and spat and coughed again. But it caught full out at last and thundered off a deafening fifteen fifty.

Fallon cut the gun. "All right," he called. "She'll do."

The blocks came away and he tooled her pretentiously out to the line, waving the escorting crew men off. When her nose bit the wind at the entrance to the landing way he shook the stick in token that Billy was to take over. But Billy must have had his mind elsewhere, for he did not answer. Then Fallon called aloud.

"Yes, sir," Billy answered promptly.

Smoothly then he laid the throttle wide and caught the left-torque twist with a deft right foot to the rudder bar. Out the snow-cleared fairway, into the yellow sea of the west, the pay ship stormed. A tiny hummock ticked her wheels. She leaped and hung, then spurned the frozen ground once more, and the air grew strong beneath her wings.

Fallon was no judge of fine distinctions in the art of flight. But even he perceived, no sooner than they took the air, that 09 in Cobb's hands was a different ship. Now, for the first time, he got the illusion of living flight, he felt the buoyant solidity of the atmosphere—no void but a thick, sustaining fluid. The ship seemed to be flying herself. She rode the air with the unconscious assurance of a bird; she swam the sky as a fish swims water. Without a perceptible break of pace, without slip or skid or dip she swung the first turn. So easily, so smoothly she drew the graceful arc, he would not have known her course had changed but for the stately wheeling of the earth below. Fallon's impression was that they were poised on a lofty pinion, immobile, while underneath the dwindling white-and-gray-plaid landscape marched around, fixed to a giant turntable.

He sighed and settled back. Was it for this he had trembled and gnawed his hot lips all that day?

"Kemp was a dub!" he grunted ungraciously.

The ship remained immobile, swung in space, a great wind blowing by her, a great voice yelling round her, while the turntable motion of the snow-laid land changed gradually. Now the earth crawled rearward like a Titan roller map.

"Kemp was an awful dub!" rumbled Fallon in heavy satisfaction.

The altimeter showed a thousand feet. Langstrom, shrunk to a hand's span, crept beneath the shoulders of the pay ship and was blotted out. Fallon wriggled comfortably in the shelter of the wind shield and scanned the advancing airscape that rolled in from the far eastward horizon where purpling earth melted into violet sky imperceptibly. A feeling of security lulled him. This was almost a pleasure. A mite too cold, perhaps. His eye swept round the horizon, then traveled upward, tracing the arc of the deepening heavens where, low down, the faint stars began to peep and twinkle timidly, until it reached the moon and rested there, caught for an instant by the mesmeric spot of luminous silver.

Suddenly he sat erect and clutched the coaming. The moon went streaking down the violet vault like a swiftly falling meteor. And where it had been was interposed the dull-brown curtain of the pay ship's lower wing. He flung his eyes about him wildly. He could find nothing but sky. The earth had disappeared!

Then with a rush, Langstrom, a white patch crisscrossed with gray threads, flanked by little dabs of brown court-plaster—the hangars—and with a freckling of Lilliputian roofs to one side—the huts and houses of the post—veered obliquely into view and stopped abruptly at the nose of the pay ship. The engine hushed its roar and the wailing of the wires began. They were gliding in for the first landing.

Fallon got his breath. But he no sooner got it than he lost it. For even to his inexpert eye it was evident that they were going to overshoot. Too high by five hundred feet at least! He gasped with opened mouth and the cold wind bit his lungs.

Of what happened next Fallon had no distinct memory. He could recall the instant when, in a black flash of consternation he registered the conviction that they would miss the field. Then there was a blank space followed by the discovery that his feet were on the rudder bar, his right hand on the stick, his left on the open throttle, and the ship yelling full out into the bright west with himself at the helm—and his pilot vanished!

This is what actually had occurred. Cobb had engineered with a vengeance the same ruse that had tricked young Pratt into assumption of control. And the paralysis of terror had wiped from Fallon's retrospect that awful moment when the sky went spinning overhead while the earth reared up on edge like a trapdoor yawning. The anæsthesia of fear had swept his brain like a great wind and cleared it of every sensation save one. But his subconscious mind had jumped into action and his hands and feet had answered. Instinct had rushed to the rescue.

Cobb, waiting up front, had smiled as he felt the panic-stricken surge of the stick, the heavy twitch of the rudder bar, that told him Fallon had swallowed the poisoned bait.

For a space too small to count in time Billy fought the heave of the crossed controls. Then he let go, slipped his belt, and huddled down in his seat and out of sight. He felt the pay ship lurch. He heard the engine cough and roar. The bubble in the inclinometer danced crazily for a bit—that was Fallon fighting unskillfully for equilibrium—and presently the needle of the altimeter began to creep up and the inclinometer to get a grip on its nerves.

A minute, perhaps two, elapsed. Billy watched the stick. It swung a little this way, a little that, patterning its movements on those of its coupled twin in the rear. All at once it showed signs of nervousness. It moved rapidly front and back. And the pay ship bobbed sharply, like a catboat in a chop.

The bobbing movement ceased. The stick edged timidly to the right. The rudder bar swung just a hair. And Billy felt the frozen wind swirling in overside as 09 skidded shamefully around a flat turn. Fallon was hugging the field. Billy thought of the sidewise scuttle of a circling crab.

"Ain't that a scandal!" he mumbled, addressing the stick.

The stick replied by resuming its frightened twitching fore and aft.

The twitching increased in scope. From bobbing nervously, 09 advanced to a strong heaving movement. And from heaving she took to a violent leaping and pitching by the head as though she were running amuck over the high hurdles.

Watchers on the ground stood bewildered at the spectacle of the pay ship—*the pay ship!*—careering across the heavens hysterically in great soaring bounds and abysmal plunges, like a hunted kangaroo in full flight.

"That's right," muttered Billy cheerfully. "Throw a fit! Throw a couple of fits! Let's see you get out of this, now!"

Fallon had let himself in for trouble already. Beginning confidently to signal for relief, he had proceeded gently at first. But when there was no answering tug at the stick he grew impatient and a little panicky. He signaled more emphatically—that is, he moved the stick with peremptory vigor. When still no answer came he passed to enraged vehemence. And that was unfortunate—for him.

For a bucking ship requires skillful gentling. And Fallon's acquaintance with bucking ships was no greater than his familiarity with bucking bronchos. He knew that when an airplane's nose is down you can bring it up by pulling back. And when the nose is up you can force it down by thrusting forward. But he didn't know that an airplane whose nose is alternately rising and falling at a fast rate is like a pendulum. There enters here, to be dealt with, a strong factor of inertia.

To arrest the swing of a pendulum one does not thrust it back along its course. Even so with a plunging airplane.

Fallon was making the classic mistake of the air lubber. He was overcontrolling—thrusting the pendulum back. When 09's nose came up he slapped it down with violence. And when it bore down he yanked it up with vigor. Thus the pendulum swung ever wider, matters grew worse instead of better, and the pay ship cavorted with increasing gusto, seesawing on her course hysterically, her plunges ever dizzier, her leaps ever more frantic.

When this had gone on long enough, Cobb, chuckling and clinging to his belt to hold himself in, set one gloved hand to the stick and countered Fallon's technique, holding back a little when the stick swung front, thrusting front a trifle when the stick jerked back. He did this circumspectly, so that it should not be apparent to the man in the rear. And gradually 09 forsook her frenzy as Fallon, observing that less amplitude brought more control, and crediting himself with this momentous discovery, conformed all unconsciously to the tutelage of his flying mate.

Perceiving that the idea had penetrated, Billy returned his saving hand to his knee and settled back again.

Now came a period of comparative calm while Fallon hugged the field, skidding the turns deplorably. He was trying to think and fly at the same time and making a bad job of both undertakings.

The sweat of one panic had scarcely blown from his pallid cheeks when another exudation began. Having solved, as he thought, the problem of gentling 09, he faced another appalling mystery.

What had become of Cobb?

Fallon had last seen traces of his head just before the earth had turned into a trapdoor. He remembered glancing front, following the fall of the moon, and recalled seeing three inches of leather helmet peeping above the coaming. Then he had—it seemed—lost consciousness in the course of a sudden cataclysm. And, coming to, he had found himself alone—alone, deserted, abandoned to the terror of the air!

What had become of Cobb, great God!

Langstrom, at this point, ducked beneath a wing, and Fallon hastily applied a foot to the bar, canting the stick ever so little. A fiendish yammering of cross wind and torque colliding and fighting in the wires set up as the pay ship wheeled and skidded. Fallon shuddered. Was she falling apart? Was the engine running mad? There were strange shrillings and whistlings in the air, like the voices of ghouls and goblins. Then the field swung into view around the tip of a wing and he set the controls at neutral.

More voices, on other keys!

He gulped. That cleared the pressure in his ears and let in a petrifying magnification of unwelcome sounds. The ship was being ripped to pieces. No doubt of it now! He braced himself for the awful moment. But the wings stuck to the center section, the motor clung to its bed, and a frightened glance astern showed the tail assemblage floating serenely aft, all neat and taut at the end of the fuselage.

The ship ran smooth on its course again. The yammering voices died. The engine thundered a steady note through the lips of the manifolds. And the sweat blew dry on Fallon's cheeks once more.

Cobb! Where was Cobb?

"Cobb!" screamed Fallon, his parched throat cracking with the effort. "Cobb! Cobb! Help! Are you there? Cobb!" It never crossed his frightened mind that by closing the throttle he could have made himself heard.

The voice of the engine roared on, drowning the words in his own ears. A church mouse might as well have squeaked his terror while the organ dinned.

A swift shadow fell across the pay ship. She shied like a frightened thoroughbred, then rolled drunkenly from wing to wing. And Fallon, in a paroxysm, saw another ship slip overhead and coast along, making for port. It was the whip of her back draft that had startled 09.

That faced him with another grisly problem. He sought the clock on the instrument board. Five thirty! Then he studied the field overside. It was turning from silver white to misty blue! Night was advancing fast. Others were fleeing it. And he was alone with the air, he who had never once braved it in his single person, he who had never tooled a ship to port! Alone in the air! Alone! And night coming on!

"Cobb!" he screamed again. "Cobb, in God's name——"

Then, as the thunder of the engine answered harshly, the conviction smote him! Cobb was dead!

What other explanation? Dead, or as good as dead! He had heard of such things happening.

Cobb was dead!

Up there, slumped below the coaming, sprawled in the tomb of the forward cockpit, a corpse was riding! Death had come to point the way to death!

And so the pay ship, in the mind of the wretched man, became a lofty hearse, bearing a stiffening corpse and a doomed and stricken soul!

And meanwhile Billy Cobb crouched at ease, warmed by the draft of hot air from the engine housing, and watched his victim fly his own imagined funeral.

He saw the sun slip under the horizon. He saw the western cloud racks shade from gold to red and red to purple. An eye to the low-cut coaming at the side, he picked out other ships that drifted down, out of the lingering afterglow of the higher levels, to plunge into the colder tide of shadow creeping in from the east, shrouding the earth from day. One by one he saw them glimmer home, the last of the belated vagrants, crossing the hangar lines like tiny wraiths, hovering out the landing ways, turning and crawling to their burrows.

The tide of dusk rose higher. At length it reached the pay ship and engulfed it. Objects below grew misty, formless. Here and there lights sprang up about the purple countryside. Overhead the stars burned clear. The moon was riding higher. And presently it would light the full of night, spreading the world with silver gray!

Fallon too observed these omens. And against the surrender counseled by despair rose the spirit that turns and makes a last stand when death is by. He was sure he could not save himself. But in spite of that certitude he prepared to try. Now he had one chance in a million. A few more minutes would wipe even that last forlorn occasion out of the reckoning.

He drew the throttle back and nosed the pay ship down. The wailing of the wires sounded faintly as the engine hushed its beat. It swelled. The needle on the altimeter showed a steady fall. The field, blurred and blue, expanded. It came on and passed beneath the ship. Fallon contrived a breathless turn and took the back track. The field passed by again. He played the landing, tacking back and forth, edging downward fearfully, with bated breath. He was afraid of playing it too high, afraid of playing it too low, afraid to turn. And in the end he was afraid of crashing.

But the desperation of doom kept him at it. And presently the hangar line showed darkly near. He laid straight over it, only to find that it wasn't nearly near enough. He dropped the nose to crowd in closer. With that the screaming of the wires rose to a deafening pitch, the dusky ground leaped up, pale, and hard and terrible, and he swept the stick to his breast in a spasm of fright. He was more than ground shy. He was ground obsessed. The sight of the earth rushing upward froze his marrow.

The pay ship leaped to the sweep of the stick. The pale ground dropped away. In the nick of time Fallon thought to tend the throttle, and presently the dumfounded watchers on the airdrome saw 09 climbing frantically into the last faint light of the west, while the first frail moonbeams flashed on her tilted airfoils.

Fallon made no second attempt. The one experience blasted his last reserve of moral energy. Death in four or five hours was better than death at once. Now that he knew he must die, every second was a precious reservoir of life. He would not have risked losing one.

The moon rode higher. And the pay ship rose to meet it. Fallon sat speechless, clutching the stick as he clung to life, while doom and the winter night filled his bones with ice.

Billy, crouching in the warm breath of the engine up front, yawned and watched the moon ride round the sky.

Higher rode the moon, and brighter. The silver blue of the snowscape far below was pricked with ruddy stars and mottled here and there with gleaming roads. The silver blue of the heavens was starry too and crossed with the glittering strand of the Milky Way. Star-flecked heavens drooped to star-flecked earth. And both were welded imperceptibly by darkling mist where the dim horizons hid.

Billy kept careful vigil on landmarks, for it was no part of his program to lose the ready refuge of the field—although he was prepared to accept that contingency if necessary. But presently two orange bouquets blossomed in the argent depths. And from then on Fallon circled the beacon fires set out to guide him to the spot where he conceived that he must die.

Round and round, through that pale, still winter night, the pay ship thundered, climbing doggedly. For Fallon shunned the frozen ground that waited for his bones. Full out she climbed and thundered, a tongue of flame thrust from either manifold along her flanks, a sheen of moonbeams dancing in the disk of her propeller. Far down on Langstrom men listened to her rising song that tapered as she climbed until it thinned to the slender thread of a gusty long-drawn sigh.

Round and round she drifted, sighing for Langstrom, thundering for Fallon.

The beacon fires dwindled to winking pin points, calling her home. But she could not go. The tremulous hand that clutched her stick urged her higher and higher, up into the moon.

An hour passed. Another hour. Petrified, congealed, with one eye on the beacon lights and the other on his fate, Fallon held the pay ship round her course. The bite of the cold and the bite of terror lost their intensity. He grew numb. At first the bitter side swipes that blew across the cockpit in the skidding turns had made him flinch and catch his breath. And similarly each new breath of hopelessness that blew across his brain. Hundreds of times in imagination he had coasted down the night to death. Sometimes he had missed the field completely and crashed in swamps, in trees, on concrete roads, athwart the roofs of houses. Sometimes he had made the field but leveled off too late—or too soon—and met his horrid end with equal finality. Repeatedly he had perished miserably in the flames of the wreck. Once he had exploded through a hangar and lain crushed in the débris.

But as the minutes spun out the hours, and the hours more hours, the poignancy of what was coming lost its edge, until at last his fear became heavy and inarticulate and he all but forgot of what he was afraid. Dully he sat and swung the stick—he moved mechanically now—while his fear sat on him like the senseless horror of a dream without image. And with each flicker of red from the manifolds his time drew on, for he had left the engine full out and the gas was running low. Once he had thought to husband the precious flow of fuel upon which his life—as he conceived it—depended. But when he edged the throttle back the ship swayed drunkenly as she lost headway, and he opened out again in febrile haste. At fifteen thousand feet one must be a flyer to hold the air comfortably at reduced speed. The element is not so buoyant at those altitudes. Fallon had opened out and bid the pay ship fly herself. She was better at it than he was.

Four hours had dragged away. His luminous wrist watch had counted them off for him inexorably. He came suddenly out of his stupor and passed into an interior frenzy of suspense. The end must be at hand. Any minute he might expect the deadly hiccup, the gasp, the ultimate cough that would snap the last strand of his hold on the world. After that a fifteen-thousand-foot descent through the bitter moonlight into the last shadow! He strained his ears for the first warning—and realized that they ached with the pressure of blood and the unfamiliar torture of the engine's din. But he strained them all the same. Every gust of sound—and an airplane has many voices, tongues within tongues—thrilled him with a keen horrific thrill that stretched him taut like the galvanic shock of a high-volt current. He had been cold. But he found now that he still possessed reserves of thermal energy. The sweat burst from his clammy flesh again, clouded his goggles, soaked his clothing.

Still the engine shouted unflaggingly. The minutes crawled by in racking terror, and it cried its power to the moon without remit. Now, like the suicide who flees from death into death, he began to yearn for the final stroke. Would it never come? Rigid as a cataleptic he waited. The silver-misted earth wheeled round below. The frigid moon, now past its zenith, slipped about the frigid sky. His muscles ached with the tension. His bones must crack, he thought, under the crushing weight of this suspense.

All at once he broke!

Limp and sweating, aching with fatigue, he bowed his tortured head to the coaming and sobbed with great shaking gasps. And the pay ship staggered like a drunken ghost through the high white night as he clung to the stick and shook.

Then the engine coughed!

On either side of the landing way that ran from east to west through the snow on Langstrom, the beacon fires blazed. And in their ruddy light men muffled in winter dungarees and helmets moved about, holding their hands to the heat, stamping their feet, flapping their arms. Now and again one would turn his face from the red of the flames to the silver of the moon and stare intently. Up there somewhere a gusty voice was sighing tirelessly, sighing like the sigh of the prairie winds through the wires of the overland trunk. But the source of the voice was invisible. It might have been the Banshee of the Moon. It might have been a chanting star.

"I tell you," said Norris, for the hundredth time that night, "there's nothing to fret about. Bill knows his business!"

"I wish to God he was safely down here, all the same!" said Pratt.

"He'll bring her in when he gets around to it—or the gas runs out. Shut up!" snapped Norris.

Now Norris never snapped. Pratt rightly judged that his confidence in Billy's private star was undergoing a severe strain regardless of his sanguine attitude.

"What time did you say he took off?" questioned Norris presently.

"Close to five o'clock," said Pratt.

"Then," said Norris, consulting his watch by the firelight, "it's about time——"

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned Pratt, tensing suddenly.

Norris tore off his helmet and cocked an ear at the moon.

"Ah-h-h!" he said. "Ah-h-h!"

All about the fires other men stood, their helmets dangling in their hands, their heads askew.

A voice was raised: "She's conked!"

Another voice: "They're coming down!"

From throat to throat, around the fires, along the shadowy hangar line, and back into the post, the news was relayed: "Coming down!"

Running feet began to thud. Doors slammed. Windows banged. Neighbor called to neighbor. And presently a breathless company began to trickle, singly and in groups, between the Bessoneaux. The community of Langstrom, man, woman, and child, overflowed onto the the field and huddled around the fires. Every face was turned palely to the sky.

"Light up!" cried Norris. "Quick, now!"

A dozen men snatched brands from the blazing beacons and hurried off. Twelve more beacons, ready laid against the moment, broke into flames along the landing way. A lurid avenue of fire was flung across the field to light the pay ship home.

Fallon choked in the middle of a sob and sat up.

The engine coughed again. A last red gush burgeoned from the manifolds. Then the disk of the propeller broke up and vanished. In its place a massive tapered arm of wood swung listlessly and stopped. The white silence of the upper levels woke to the soft keening of flying wires and the whicker of vibrant linen cutting swiftly through the air.

Fallon peered overside. Two pin points of red, remote, elusive, winking on and off against the gray silver of the snow, held his haggard gaze for an instant. There was enough space between them to slip a sheet of paper. And he must thread an airplane through the eye of such a needle!

The moon seemed to blink and pass behind a veil. The earth faded beneath his eyes. He sighed and leaned weightily against the safety belt. His left hand slipped from the throttle, his right dropped from the stick. The moon looked down on his crumpled shoulders.

Fallon had fainted!

Fortunately his belt was broad and tight. It held his limp body clear of the stick. His feet still hung helplessly on the rudder bar but his knees were flexed and unresisting.

Left to herself, the pay ship raised her nose and fell off gently by the wing. Billy, in a half doze up front, came alive and guessed what had happened. He tested the stick stealthily. It swung free. Then he tried the rudder bar. It was heavy with the weight of Fallon's feet, but it answered.

He gave the pay ship a touch of the stick and set her on an easy glide. Facing about and climbing the seat he peered along the fuselage. The moonlight showed him Fallon's huddled figure.

"Hell!" muttered Billy scrambling around and pulling out of a slip, "he don't stand the medicine very well!"

Over the side he picked up the field and laid a little east, bearing down sharply to gather way. The wires moaned and wailed and the back draft hissed forebodingly.

"Dog-gone him!" grunted Billy. "He's killed a few himself, but I didn't aim to go that far! Shucks! Maybe he's playing possum. I'll see."

The stick swung hard to the coaming, the pay ship flung a shadowy wing to the stars, and a vicious side swipe ripped from tip to tip through her rigging.

Billy held her to the dizzy slip till her nose fell. But there was no reassuring remonstrance from the rear.

He brought her back to her course. "Shucks!" he muttered apprehensively. "Not a peep!"

Far below, out of the moon-drenched profundity, he saw the ranks of fire blossom across the field.

"Good old John!" he grunted. "That's a bright idea. But the moonlight is enough."

The ship swept into a spiral, steep and tight, and began reeling off the altitude five hundred feet to each screaming round. Billy watched the beacons dilate, lifting nearer and nearer, as they wheeled with the wheeling earth.

Suddenly the pay ship jumped and shuddered.

"Funny," said Billy, frowning. For the night was windless and the air as smooth as silver sirup.

She jumped again.

"Oh-ho!" said Billy, his brow clearing. He looked over his shoulder. Fallon was sitting up. The moonlight glinted on his goggles revealingly.

"Cobb!" came a husky cry. "Cobb!" Now that the engine was mute the cry carried clearly.

"Here!" called Billy, tightening the spiral maliciously.

"Oh, God! You're there. You're not dead?"

For answer Billy considerately reversed the spiral with a drop and a swoop and a sickening lift.

The pleading voice was hushed for a time while the wires sang and whistled. Then it resumed.

"Cobb! Talk to me. Answer. We'll make it? Can you make it? Will we crash?"

"Don't know," yelled Billy. "You'd better take her yourself, sir! It's ticklish!"

"Oh, God!" wailed the voice.

In the silence that followed the wires keened and sang. They keened in Fallon's ears. They sang in Billy's.

A thousand feet to go. Cobb could see the outline of the huts against the snow, and the stretch of the long grim line of hangars, with pools of moonlight lying in the gaps. He crowded them close.

"Now yell some more," chuckled Billy as the field swept near—too near.

And obediently the husky voice from the rear burst out: "My God! You're overshooting!"

"Hang on!" roared Billy then. And in an undertone he added: "If you lay a finger on that stick you'll never live to wish you hadn't!"

With that he stood the pay ship on her ear and she split the moonlight in a swift slip.

"God help me now!" screamed Fallon.

"That's right! Pray!" chuckled Cobb as the hangars loomed and swelled.

A hundred feet above the snow he nosed in a little, heaved hard against the stick, gave her an instant's head for way when she flattened out, swayed left a bit with a lift and a lilt, and shot her smoothly over the line and into the ruddy avenue where the flanking beacons glowed and flickered.

"Thank God! Thank God! Thank God!" he could hear a husky voice droning rapidly.

Then the wavering play of the flames showed him the fleeting ground at hand. He drew back. The pay ship hovered. He drew back more. She hovered again. He pulled the stick to the end of its course and a tremor ran through the fuselage as wheels and tail skid brushed the frozen ground. She bowled along for fifty feet and stopped.

Billy rose and turned around. Along the firelit landing way a flying wedge was coming. The air was full of thudding feet and calling voices. A man who had outstripped the ruck veered around the tail of the pay ship and halted panting by the wing.

It was Norris. Pratt was two jumps behind him.

"Hello you," said Billy coolly. "Major Fallon's compliments, and he needs the ambulance."

They stared into the after cockpit and saw what Billy meant. Fallon was playing possum again.

XI.

The ambulance took on its freight and drove away. The crowd milled round the pay ship, venting its curiosity—and got no satisfaction. It dispersed.

"Bill," said Norris, when the two were alone at last, "what *did* you do?"

"Ask Fallon," said Cobb.

And it was weeks before Norris or anybody else could pry the story loose. Billy referred all inquiries to Fallon.

Physically, his victim's collapse amounted to nothing. But morally the man never recovered. The air had broken him completely.

The air, mind you; not Cobb. As Billy pointed out later when it was safe to discuss the business freely, he had done nothing. That was the peculiar, poetic fitness of what had happened. He had set the stage—provided an occasion—it is true. But who could prove it? That secret was locked in his own brain.

It was freely predicted that he would be tried, disgraced, and hounded out of the service. And the post marveled when none of these things came true. But Billy was not surprised. He believed his defense was air-tight. And it must have been. For Fallon waived reprisal.

The beaten man was prostrated during two full days. On the third he fled the post and took up quarters in a distant village where he could be at peace from the snarl of engines, the whistle of wires, and the sight and smell of ships.

It was a week before he ventured to spend a day at his desk.

His first preoccupation was, of course, to wipe the name of Cobb from the rolls of the service. But when he took a pencil and tried to draft the charges he discovered that Billy's position was unassailable. There was nothing provable to be charged. Conversely, to a board of inquiry, or a general court, it must appear from the evidence—unless he perjured himself—that he Fallon, the pilot of record, had proven himself unworthy his wings, and that Cobb had, in fact, been the hero of the episode.

For days he mulled it over. For days his only refuge from the dinning of a brain that lived and relived for him every minute of that shuddering business, over and over interminably, was in the search for some safe angle of attack against Cobb. But however he approached the problem the answer emerged unaltered in effect. An official airing of his grievance would injure him and glorify Billy.

He gave it up at last. He had not even the courage to call his tormenter to verbal account and demand a statement of his motive. Fallon was afraid that the mere confrontation of Cobb would throw him into a stuttering panic.

So potent a thing is fear, even in retrospect!

The weeks of March went blustering by and Billy was unmolested. Rain fell. The snow departed. Gray and sodden, the airdrome stretched under its last year's coat of rotting grass. The ships loafed in the hangars while the rain drums beat on the streaming roofs and the rafters swayed and groaned with the weight of the spring winds.

Flying was out of the question. Even in the breathing spells between storms, when the waxing sun broke through the dun ceiling for an hour, or a day, the field was closed to ships. It was a bog.

Cobb put in the time overhauling engines and stripping wings in search of the dry rot. He kept Pratt at his elbow. And before that month was out the boy had become a fledgling engineer.

Billy told him this one night. But it brought him small comfort.

"Perhaps," he said dully. "But what good is it if I can't fly?"

"Wait," said Billy. "That will come, too. Remember what John said?"

"That nonsense about a spell, or something?"

"Uh-huh!"

Pratt shook his head and Billy switched the subject—or seemed to.

"Have you noticed a change on this post recently?" he asked.

"No," said Pratt. "Nothing special."

"Fallon?" suggested Cobb.

"I haven't seen anything of him at all since he moved his quarters out."

"Just so," said Billy.

Had Pratt been less troubled by bad dreams and a tender conscience he would have noted long since that Fallon had gone into seclusion. All the post was wondering at it—and breathing more freely in consequence.

It was Mallory who made the daily inspections now. Fallon had lost interest in everything—even paint and faultfinding. Each day he drove furtively from his distant quarters to his office and furtively back again, seldom venturing outside the sanctuary of headquarters. An orderly brought him his lunches from the club. He not only did not want to look at Langstrom; he shrank from having Langstrom look at him. The hangars never saw him after that fatal night when he fled them on a stretcher. Brook the smell of castor oil and gas, the sight of the pay ship?—never! At night, in frightful dreams, he breathed that horrid perfume, he rode that dismal ship! It was enough.

The equinox blew by on the dripping wings of a southeast gale. Then a calm rain fell. A west wind followed, the clouds broke up, and Langstrom steamed in the sun. The field dried out in the nick of time, and one bright morning, with the smell of warm, wet earth and the feel of running sap in the air, Fallon reached the post to a chorus of shouting engines riding round the sky.

Ship after ship zipped out the fairway; ship after ship sang down the homing glide. The pay hoppers were at it. For another day March would be dead. And you cannot hop in April for the pay that belongs with March.

On his desk that morning, beside the usual pile of correspondence, Fallon found a printed form. It was the monthly pay voucher—the bill each officer presents the government for services rendered. Thereon, neatly typed, was the familiar paragraph:

> I certify that during the period for which pay is claimed I have participated in frequent and regular flights.

Fallon sat heavily, with a grunt of dismay. He leaned his head in his hands and read that paragraph. A homing ship went soughing and whickering over the rooftree, and the type on the voucher blurred beneath his eyes.

Presently he took the voucher in his hands. There was the crisp sound of tearing fiber. He stretched out trembling fingers, and from them fluttered mangled flakes of white that scattered on the carpet.

On a stand in one corner was a typewriter. He sat at it and composed a letter. Painfully, with one finger for the keys and one for the space bar he drafted the fulfillment of Norris' prophecy: "He'd quit like a shot. He hates this game." For Fallon's flying pay had stopped. It lay where he dared not go and claim it.

April brought flying weather. But scant flying. For the hoodoo still lingered in headquarters at Langstrom. His presence —even semioccasional—kept the memory of nine dead men green in the minds of the wary.

These were days of renewed misery for Pratt. He had resumed his air work with Cobb. But though the high blue called, and his heart urged, and his brain counseled, and his conscience lashed, he could not trust himself to the air alone. There were still those nights of dreaming, when he rode to his doom in ships that flamed and screamed. There were still the shivering dawns when he woke, sometimes, to an engine's snarling and ducked under the blankets to muffle the menace of the dreadful pur. There were still the interminable, silly omens—that were never realized.

The month was half gone when he reached his decision. He had left the club after the evening meal and had come out to the hangar line to put his thoughts in order.

The sun had passed behind the hills, and the field stretched gray and cool in the lingering day. The curtains of the shouldering hangars moved and muttered in a light breeze blowing in with the scent of inland growth just come to life. The boy paced up and down the line, piling reason on reason, justification on justification, reproach on reproach. And it all boiled down to this, that he loved the air but he feared it and he had not the strength to serve it well. Even in his short experience of the profession he had learned how little good—how much harm—may come of a man who serves the air in fear.

His conclusion was to leave it, to go at once, as soon as a resignation could run the channels that resignations run and bring him his release.

He made toward a gap in the hangar line and was turning the corner when a faint voice caught his ear, a voice that sent a little shiver—that inevitable chill—along his spine.

"A ship!" he said, and stopped to listen.

A ship it was, without a doubt. First a faint thread of silver sound, like the dying note of a distant chime, then a louder droning, and at last a windy chantey, strong and clear, the voice of the stranger ship sang and mounted.

A DH winged into sharp silhouette against the south and bore down swiftly. Around the twilit field it swung, just once, then floated in through the gathering dusk with a cough and a ghostly murmur and a rumble of wheel and skid as it sank to rest.

Pratt was waiting on the line when it taxied up with a crew man from the "alert" shift on either wing.

Its pilot came down overside and the boy advanced to meet him. He was a tall, lean man, with furrowed cheeks that the years had marked and a chin that the years had failed to lower. He was alone.

The lone pilot shook hands, mentioned a name, and asked a question.

"Major Fallon?" said Pratt. "He lives off the post. But the adjutant's at the club. I'll take you there."

"Never mind," said the stranger. "But I'll thank you to put this ship up and send my bag after me when you can spare a man. What's the adjutant's name?"

"Mallory—Lieutenant Mallory, sir."

"I know him well," said the grizzled pilot. "I'll find him all right."

The tall figure strode away. And presently Mallory got the pleasantest shock of his life. But he had no time to pass his tidings round.

"Just get Fallon and say nothing," said the newcomer. "We'll do this very quietly. I don't want a fuss made, Mike. Get Fallon."

From the outer office the red-headed adjutant could hear what was passing behind the inner door.

"No," the voice of the newcomer was saying, "to-night!"

"But—but the property transfers, and ——" That was Fallon.

"No," the new voice said. "To-night! We'll send the inventory and clearances after you. You'll trust my inventory, Fallon—because you'll have to. I won't have you on my post. Do you understand? You killed Barney—you probably killed the other eight. I won't have you here another hour. You've been a mockery in the service—and a curse on this post. You've got your orders. You asked for them. You can go!"

A car purred stealthily away from headquarters. At the outer gate a sentry barred its way. It crept to a halt with muttering brakes and a voice from the driver's seat called: "Major Fallon."

The sentry advanced and peered. Then he stepped aside. And the car rolled out the gate.

Thus furtively, with fitting secrecy, the hoodoo of Langstrom slunk away through the night, unattended and unsped.

Far into the night the lights burned at headquarters and Mallory worked and explained and conferred with the newcomer. By the time he was free to spread the news there was none awake to listen.

It was wholly dark by the time Pratt had finished putting the stranger ship to bed. He was too full of his own troubled affairs to wonder what had brought it to Langstrom. If he thought about it at all he probably decided that the lone pilot had dropped in for a call—or to inspect. Something of that sort. Pilots were always dropping in and dropping out.

The boy traversed the hangar line and passed through the post. He vaguely noted Fallon's car standing outside headquarters, and saw that a light burned in the window of the C. O.'s office. But he did not see the face of the man who sat at the C. O.'s desk.

He went on to the bachelors' hut and shut himself in his own cubicle. He sat and wrote. Five scribbled sheets were crumpled and flung on the floor before he was satisfied. The sixth he read over twice. Then he sighed and settled back.

When he woke, the drop light was prying at his eyelids and the hut was full of sleeping sounds, the creak of a bedspring, the rustle of blankets, the comfortable rumble of a snore. He looked at his watch with a start of surprise, undressed, and went to bed.

The early sun was bright on Langstrom when he came out of a dreamless sleep and stretched deliciously. Some noise had waked him. He listened. There was a great, cheerful roaring outside, a lusty, friendly shouting. He knew that deep voice well. Yet it sounded strangely. The snarl and the menace were gone. It did not drive him shivering beneath the covers. It held a jovial note, an invitation, a call!

With widening eyes he listened. Suddenly he tossed his blankets off and leaped from bed.

"By George!" he grunted breathlessly, scrambling into his clothes. "By George!"

He pulled a leather coat and a helmet from their hooks behind the door. He hurried down the corridor of the hut, letting his heels bang noisily, heedless of the sleepers on either hand. And presently he was heading at a fast jog toward the hangar line.

An ambitious crew chief, moved by an inexplicable burst of matinal energy, was testing his engine by way of working up an appetite for breakfast. Crew chiefs—like other humans—do astonishing things in the spring. He had run his ship to the line with the aid of a "dolly" and a helpful sentry. It was an overhaul job, just completed the night before.

He sat at the stick and lent approving ear to the sharp bite of the thunderous blast that poured through the manifolds. His eye was fixed to the dial of the rev counter which showed a clean fifteen seventy-five—and the ship on the blocks at that. Being thus preoccupied he was surprised and startled when a hand clapped him on the shoulder.

He peered around to recognize an eager face looking over the coaming, It was Pratt, trying to outshout four hundred horse!

Billy Cobb sat up in bed and listened. He looked at his watch. Six thirty. "Now who can that be?" said Billy. He dressed and went out. Presently he returned and shook Norris by the shoulder.

"Hu-u-uh?" yawned Norris.

"It beats me!" said Billy. "Listen!"

"To what?" said Norris, hitching onto an elbow.

"That ship!"

"Oh!" said Norris and lent an ear.

Thin, and far, and witching, then, the voice came to him. Like a silver shower it sprayed downward over the huts of Langstrom.

"Well?" said Norris.

"That's the kid—that's Pratt!"

Norris scratched his head. Then he looked at Cobb.

"Fallon has quit!" said Norris.

"Huh!"

"Fallon has quit!"

"Pshaw! You ain't awake, John!"

"Fallon has quit!" repeated Norris.

"What makes you talk so foolish!" said Billy.

Norris rolled from his cot and went to the open window. He peered out and pointed:

"That!" said Norris.

"But—but—even so, the kid don't know it, does he?"

"Bill," said Norris, "how many times have I told you that this is a funny game?"

"Well?" said Cobb.

"It makes you feel things in your bones," said Norris.

A tall, lean man came out on the porch at the C. O.'s quarters, tilted his head and listened. Somewhere in the sunlight overhead Pratt's ship was at its matins still. The man on the porch looked up. He saw the ship. It was a flake, a wisp, that helioed a beckoning flash from the polished curve of a tilted airfoil.

The new C. O. made a gesture of response. Then he hurried down the steps and set his face to the airdrome.

And so the hoodoo passed from Langstrom, an airman took the stick, and this tale that Norris told passed into the legends of the blue domain.

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BREAKING THE LOW LIMIT

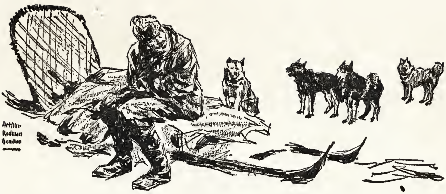
DWELLERS in congested areas are viewing with ever-increasing alarm the tendency of scatter-brained aviators to indulge in foolhardy exhibition flights at dangerously low altitudes. The problem of what to do about excessively low flight over cities will grow, of course, more and more acute as the use of the airplane becomes more general.

The flyer who deliberately and without pressing cause pilots his craft over a city at an altitude insufficient to allow of a safe glide to open country in case of motor failure, is guilty of an act just as reprehensible as that of the motorist who grossly exceeds the speed limit. In fact he is guilty of greater negligence, because a mishap to an airplane over a crowded area is likely to result in not one or two but a score of deaths and possibly in a disastrous fire to boot.

What is a safe height for the transurban airplane to maintain? That depends upon the flying qualities of the particular craft in any given situation, and upon the extent of the congested area of population to be crossed. Generally speaking, it is safe to assume that the average airplane will glide, with engine stalled, approximately three times its altitude. That is to say that an airplane starting a glide from a point a mile above a selected land mark will touch ground three miles distant from that land mark—more or less. Some of the smaller and faster craft will not glide that far. Other craft will glide farther. But it is safe to work on the basis of a three-to-one glide—and allow liberally for miscalculations. Therefore, if the city in which you are interested has a radius, for instance, of three miles, no airplane should be allowed to approach it, in the vertical plane, nearer than one mile, or approximately five thousand feet. The wise and conscientious pilot will stick closer to six thousand, the matter of a thousand feet more or less being a mere detail in these days of a half a horse power a pound, when airplanes climb a thousand feet a minute on the lower levels.

New York City, which boasts an aërial force as a component of its police system, proposes to hold police planes in readiness to warn off craft which fly too near. The difficulty with the scheme is that any flyer who chooses to disregard the air cop's warning may do so with impunity, and for as long as his gas and oil hold out. The police craft dare not shoot him down so long as his fall would imperil the citizens beneath, and the minute he crosses the city line he is past the reach of the municipal law. Of no avail to take his number. You can't arrest a flyer in Jersey for breaking a local air ordinance in the ethereal precincts of New York City.

Evidently, of course, a Federal air code and a Federal air police will solve the difficulty. When that day comes it will no longer be a joking matter to break the minimum altitude limit. The Federal guardians of the airways will follow the offender to his lair, no matter how many municipal or State lines he crosses, and the penalty will be in all likelihood not only a fine but a prison sentence. The air is a big place and there is plenty of room in it for bad actors. The only way to make it safe is to impose severe penalties for violations of its laws, penalties so severe that none will dare incur them, even though the chances of escape are a thousand to one.



Mute Tongues

By Theodore Seixas Solomons

Author of "The Avails of the Fraction," "The Berg Battlers," Etc.

What the broken Alaska prospector was too far gone in remorse to reason out for himself the mute tongues of his dogs revealed to him.

A LONG, dry fall enabled the owners of Three Above on Candle Creek to work until the end of October—unheard of for summer diggings. But on the thirty-first a heavy snowfall closed the claim for the year and turned loose its small crew, including George Knight.

He had drawn nothing since he went to work in the late spring, and there was weighed out to him twelve hundred and some odd dollars in fairly clean dust. The old poke containing it sagged heavily in his worn overalls pocket as he jog-trotted behind his team of four, bound for Candle town at the creek mouth. Having idled about all fall, the dogs wallowed through the drifted valley side eagerly, tongues out, eyes bright. The snow again! The snow that would not melt for more than half a year!

Knight loved it too, with the love of the Far Northern prospector. The dank brown of summer and autumn depressed him always. But now he remained depressed, in spite of his world turned gloriously alight. He did not know what he was going to do—after attending to the errand that was taking him to town. And this after five years of battle, outer and inner—especially inner!

It was two in the afternoon when he drew up in front of Wiseman's store and post office and told his dogs to lie down. Wiseman weighed his dust again, took out a small amount owed him for tobacco and odds and ends during the summer, and announced twelve hundred dollars remaining, almost to a pennyweight.

"Money orders," said Knight. "When does the first mail go out?"

"To-morrow morning, my boy," answered Wiseman.

"That so? Gee, I'm just in time, ain't I?" He made out applications in the name of Miranda Knight of a certain address in a town of the Middle West; but he seemed uncertain as to the aggregate amount for which he wished the money orders made out.

"Lemme see," he mused aloud. "Figure nine months, to be sure, at seventy-five dollars. Gee! Things are high in the States, they say."

"Sure high," corroborated Wiseman, watching him. There was no one in the store at the time.

"Well, better make it a hundred dollars a month. That's nine hundred."

"Children, too?" asked the storekeeper and postmaster.

"Two," was the answer.

"Why not make it round numbers—a thousand dollars?" suggested Henry Wiseman.

"Leaves me pretty near broke! Well, I

guess you're right," muttered the prospector. "Let it go at that."

He watched the man make out the orders. He eyed the poke lying on the counter. He remembered something that had happened last year—and the distress it had caused to that woman and those children in the little town in the bleak mid-western State where fuel was high and work often scarce.

He put the orders in a stamped envelope and addressed it, but left it open for the insertion of a letter which he intended to write that evening. He put it in the breast pocket of his coat and, before replacing the poke in his pants pockets stood and held it and looked at the little chunk at the bottom of the long poke—the two hundred dollars which remained to him with which he must begin another hard winter. He wandered over to the Monaco saloon to see who was there after the big snowstorm; to chat a while.

The place was half full, somewhat dark —for the lamps would not be lit for another hour—happy, hopeful, breathing camaraderie. There was a little play at the gambling games in the rear of the big resort.

Knight had a couple of drinks—from sociability, for he was not a drinking man. He felt cheered, his depression lessened. He wandered over to the games and stood watching the faro table where a friend was winning small sums. Almost immediately he walked away again and conversed with an up-creek acquaintance, but he was hardly conscious of what either of them was saying. His mind was on his poke, which he could feel, light as it was, in his overalls pocket—and on the faro table.

While he was talking about the work on Three Above—how far into the bank they had been able to follow the low-grade streak —he was arguing with himself that two hundred dollars was a hopeless sum with which to begin a winter. He had little or no grub, his tools were worn; how could he do anything on his old wildcat on Minnehaha Creek? A man had to mine, himself, if he ever wanted to make even a modest stake and get out of the country. He owed it to himself, he owed it to the forsaken three in the little town in God's country, to keep mining—for himself. That is what his thinking mind was saying while his talking mind was discussing Three Above. But there was a third mind—it was this that he was arguing with—that listened and smiled cynically, and warned him.

His heart beat rapidly. Daring came into his eyes. From the back of his head he could see the faro dealer paying out to the man who was winning. It was an unlucky day for "the house," evidently. He told his third mind—the unspeaking, monitory consciousness—that two hundred dollars was neither here nor there. He would be hardly less well off without it. If he lost it he'd have to work again for wages—and so get enough to prospect with.

Abruptly he left the acquaintance and walked rapidly back to the faro table, fearing that his bold resolution would fade if he tarried. He laid down his poke and asked for a hundred dollars in chips. He sat down and took the cases.

He won; he lost; he won. Abruptly, then, he lost. He experienced a moment of apparent indecision, though the inward monitor smiled cynically, knowing it was not a real indecision.

"Another hundred," he told the dealer. "Just two hundred in the poke."

"Right-o!" said "Cold-eye" Wilson, genially, handing him another stack without hesitation. There were several others playing, now, besides the man who had been winning.

George Knight played cautiously, his face flushed. His heart had steadied. It was only between playing, when the will to play or to cease oppressed him, that it raced.

He won twenty-five dollars with his second hundred dollars of chips. Then he put down twenty-five dollars, lost it, repeated this, and lost again. And once again! Instantly, as though himself acting a passive part in the clutch of some other intelligence —the real master—he put the remaining fifty on a card and watched the dealer's thumb. One, two; one, two; high card, low card. Three times the thumb thrust out two cards from the little metal box. Then the hand reached forward and plucked away his chips.

Knight bent over the case, thrusting down the counters mechanically until the box was empty—and the counters all down. It was purely mechanical, for his mind was far off—with his emotions. His heart was beating like a trip hammer. He felt that his face was bursting with the blood pounding through the arteries of his head. He was struggling, as he had struggled many times before, in the hard clutch of a mighty lust.

He whispered to himself, over and over again, the feeble, futile argument that after four straight losses he was sure to win; and by increasing the bet—— Whereat the inner monitor smiled derisively.

He sat out the ensuing deal, abandoning the cases to another. But in his chair he sweated and wondered if his neck were going to burst.

One bet, only! Just one. A fairly large one—enough to get his two hundred back. Compromise. That was compromise, with the probabilities all on his side. And instantly his heart ceased pounding.

He slipped up to the dealer and handed him the envelope with the money orders.

"A thousand in there—post-office money orders. Gimme two hundred on 'em, huh?"

Cold-eye Wilson gave him a quick upward glance and put the envelope in his money drawer. When Knight drew up he handed him two hundred dollars in chips.

Then George Knight knew hell—its deepest! He lived a year of life—consumed five years of health. He ate into the core of his nervous system. His heart was steady in its beating, but sick. He was flooded with a deadly nausea. He had an almost imperative desire to sob while he played—reaching every few minutes—or was it hours?—for "another hundred." He felt like a man in a choking tunnel whose only way of running through and getting out—where he could breathe and live—was to *play!* He heard the monitor droning, "You can stop; you can stop; you can stop!" And his was now the part of derision—as if there could be stopping—in the tunnel!

"Yes, that's right. My count, too—one thousand," he heard himself saying minutes—or hours—later to Wilson, who thereupon turned from him and forgot him, his thumb always busy when his right hand was not extended to pay or take. Knight went out into the freezing air—dusk.

There was left of the brief day only a soft glow upon the snow of the long sloping hill on the other side of the river—new snow over all, to the very pole; snow that would not melt for half a year. Staring at it he came suddenly to believe it would never melt—for him!

Across the street was his sled and dogs—huddled. He did not go to his little shack, far down on the river brink, to fetch a sleeping bag, food, matches. He wanted nothing—nothing but distance and the snow!

Swiftly he crossed the street, seized the handlebars of his sled and called to his leader, Bobsy, to get up and straighten out the team. Then, suddenly, he remembered they had had nothing since the regular feeding of last night.

He did not go into Henry Wiseman's store, but into another and smaller one, and bought dried salmon for what little small change was in his pocket. He gave this to the four dogs, who attacked it, each a flat, stiff, dark-red half of a salmon, in hungry silence. Then he straightened them out, swung down the bank, crossed the smooth river, drove up the opposite bank and started straight away across the tundra—virgin white.

The dogs—his for three years, the leader four—knew their master's way of striking out, breaking trail over miles of snow. They knew he had loved it as they loved it. But they did not know that he had loved it not only for itself but because, away from the settlements, the lust did not clutch him! So they plodded through the snow, his gallant little leader, Bobsy, leaping occasionally through a drift of extra depth. The empty sled was light. They could go many miles without a trail.

George Knight was forty years old, not overintelligent, but strong save in one thing. He was a kind man, and industrious. He was cursed hardly more in his weakness than in the conscience that flayed him for it and that plunged him always, after the flayings, into a black despair. But always, before, there had been some turn, some way out. Now there seemed nothing. Winter was upon the little mid-western town, too; and his wife had said, in the patient, uncomplaining letter in his pocket to which that night he was cheerfully to have replied, that they were unprepared.

It was as though he—or the lust that was in him—it was the same thing—had slain them. And he could not face his remorse and live. He did not wish to. He was a little ashamed to die; but he was more ashamed to live. As he trudged along behind the sled he wished that he dreaded death so that thereby he might punish himself the more. He felt purified by his decision, as if already death had purged him of the weakness that had made him **not a** man. And he wanted, not death by a knife or bullet or poison tablet, but death by the purification of the snow. As the old martyrs were purified by the fire so he, devout in his self-abasement, longed for the redemption of the cold.

Calm, resolved, hate and misery alike fallen from him, he bent his mind upon little things he loved in all that was left to him of life—the dogs, the harness, the sled, the snow, the sky. As these had been the greatest solace to him in his exile, they were now consolation, sweet to think upon at the last. For resolutely he had put away from him those other thoughts to which he had no right, to dwell upon which he did not dare, those thoughts that were for men facing death not of their seeking, righteously, fearlessly—the thoughts of wife and children.

He had made the sled. It was light, strong, well balanced, straight, true in its every fiber. He lived over again the days of work upon it, two years ago. He glanced at the harness, frosted. How well the collars fitted the dogs! He had tried them on repeatedly as he cut the moosehide, shaped it and filled it with reindeer hair. He never could bear the thought of an ill-fitting, chafing collar on a hard-working dog.

How well they had repaid his kindness, his watchful care! In the fall and spring when snow forms balls under the little feet, how trustfully they would stop, turn, put up the icy paw and look at him, waiting for him to come forward and thaw the hair-entangled ball with his naked hand? They would pull their hearts out for the man whose only lashing of them was a tone of reproof. Vicariously they had been recipient, as wife and children, of the tender love of a husband and father. George Knight was fond of all animals; but his dogs he loved as symbols of the human beings he wronged by his monstrous lust of gaming.

Over one long, low hill, down to its farther base, across a streak of coulee bottom and up the next tundra ridge, silently through the dragging night this man of a calm, implacable despair, strode on and on, only the light of stars serving to guide him straight. Morning found them in the great, white valley of the Buckland River, treeless, uninhabited, a vast and empty wilderness of solitude.

Far into that morning still he traveled on, wishing the heights, the hills, beyond that valley, for his final communing before the last, long sleep. So the four dogs toiled on, the weary man following, holding to the bars during the slow ascent. Then, on the rounded summit at last, nothing about them but white—rolling white from horizon to horizon, not a trace of man as far as the eye could reach, he brought the dogs to a halt and sat down upon the rail of the empty sled.

Having eaten nothing for some thirty hours and toiled incessantly, the nerve grind of his faro play of greater havoc to him, even, than the bodily exhaustion of the journey, he was seized, presently, with a chill and a great gnawing. But this he heeded little—welcoming it, rather, as the first pangs of the dissolution he craved. But the dogs! They would soon be hungry. Before long he must turn them loose so that they might return to Candle. Without the sled, and helped by the trail they had made, it would not take them many hours to gain the little cabin by the river, nor many hours thereafter to find good homes among his neighbors, such was their reputation as sled animals. But first he would let them rest. They had doubled back upon the sled and now lay at his feet, looking up at him, wondering, no doubt, at so long a stop on a bare hill.

He called them by name—Bobsy, Tuk-tuk, Siwash—the dark one—and Pony, his wheel dog, like a little horse. He leaned down and caressed them, one by one. Their tongues were lolling; they still panted from the long uphill pull.

"Wish you could stay, little fellers," he said to them aloud, "and see me off. But you'd get too hungry. Won't do. If I could go with you or you with me to the dog heaven—if I'm fit for it—that or any other! Wish I'd 'a' thought to give you away to some feller that knows how to treat an animal. Oh, well——"

He fell to musing, his eyes sometimes on the dogs, sometimes on the snow—the horizons. He shivered repeatedly, and mechanically drew closer his parka hood, pulled its sleeves down over his mittened hands. Dreaming, brooding, an hour—two hours passed, and the sun sank, warning him that his time was short. He detached the dogs from the sled, unhooked their traces one from the other and tied them over each dog's back, so that they might not drag. Then he turned with them into the sled tracks. They followed him gladly, but when he paused and told them to "Go home!" they looked bewildered.

He staggered back to the sled waving them off and, obediently, they walked slowly away, the leader heading them as though they were in harness. But in a few moments Bobsy stopped—and stopped the others, who gathered about him. Bobsy looked back, sat on his haunches, and gave a low howl, his nose straight up in the frosty air.

"Go on, boys. Go home!" Knight tried to shout. His weak voice reached them; they turned again and walked a few reluctant steps and then stopped. First one, then another, then the four, with lowered heads and tails came creeping back to the sled.

Knight petted and talked to them, telling them they must go. He cut a switch from a stunted bush near by, came painfully back, and showed it to them. Their interest was only that of curiosity. But soon, when he started them again and they hesitated as before, he struck them, sobbingly, telling them as sternly as he could to "Mush on home, I tell you—durn you!"

Outraged, yelping, though more from surprise than pain, for the switch was too slight to be capable of damage, they trotted off—and took up a post of observation at a distance of a hundred yards.

George Knight lay down in the sled, pretending not to notice them, hoping they would trot on, hunger driven. But he feared they would not, and, fearing, sank into his first comforting drowsiness, precursor of the slow end.

He came out of it from the stimulus of several tongues upon his exposed wrists and upon his face. The dogs vied with each other to caress, to rouse him. When he opened his eyes and raised his head two of them howled close to his ear, telling him they were hungry, to please come—somewhere, anywhere.

"My God!" muttered the man. "Why can't they leave me in peace?" He was too inert, sick, to mutter longer. To himself he said, "This won't do. I got to club 'em hard. They got to go. Hunger will drive 'em off."

By a very great effort he cut from the bush its main branch, trimmed it, and, with pangs, turned upon them and beat them as best he could, his tears falling. They howled and complained, writhed away from him, but always around him, and around the sled. They would not go, and in despair he hitched them in again, using for this what seemed indeed the last of his strength. Letting them turn the sled in answer to his whispered, "Gee, Gee!" he sat in the sled and told them to go.

With tails up they threw themselves into their collars and trotted off. When they had traveled beyond the point at which they had stopped before he called to them to halt, craftily got out of the sled, piled in some chunks of snow broken by the runners lay down upon the trail back of the handlebars, and, relying upon the gathered dusk to deceive them, called to them to mush on!

They drew the sled away. He listened to the slither of the runners. For perhaps a minute he heard it, no longer. But he hoped he was merely unable to further catch the sound of it. He closed his eyes, lay upon his back and folded his hands upon his breast, being very, very sleepy and weary.

He dreamed of the soft feel of the blizzard's breath upon a numb cheek and awoke to find a dog's tongue licking his face—licking, licking assiduously. He put out his hand and felt him—Bobsy, his leader. He sat up and ran his hand along one of the traces, finding it chewed at the end. The dogs had stopped, and Bobsy had used his teeth to free himself and come back to his master. It was simply no use!

Knight managed to get to his feet and stagger back to the sled. It was overturned. The dogs had attempted to swing it about when they discovered that it was riderless. On its side they could not drag it. He could hear them howling. Doubtless they had been howling for some time—since the sled had prisoned them. But Bobsy had done more than howl.

George Knight balanced himself carefully, stooped down, grasped the side of the sled in the snow and lifted it. So light a thing even his depleted strength was equal to; but he fell exhausted into the sled, a leg over the side rail. Bobsy sprang in and licked him again—and sprang out and howled. Then in again and begged him, looking mournfully into his eyes—he could just see the deep, liquid, luster of them—

to put him into the harness that they might go on—to food and shelter.

The tongues of his dogs! He might beat, he might starve them, but their mute tongues would still speak their caressing, fostering, deathless love. They were not in the least concerned about themselves. Their fears, their anxieties, were all for him. Across the later pages of his life he reread the matchless record of their courage, their devotion, their ill-requited toil for him, the great, the loved one. Could he slay them?

Then, suddenly, though the candle of his brain burned low, the spirit within him grew illumined with a new understanding. Symbols these beautiful creatures had been of other loved ones, other dependents. Symbols they *were,* now, of a wife and children forgotten, deserted by a man intent only on wreaking upon himself the last cowardly penalties of his self-abasement—suicide.

Could he slay them, the dogs? "No!" he had whispered to his heart. Then could he slay *them*—the woman, the children—by taking his own life?

George Knight, turned back from death by the tongues of his dogs, was reborn into a new manhood. He did not know, so weak was he, whether he was to live or to die. But he did know that he would live if he could. He sat up, withdrew his mittens, and rubbed his hands in the warm fur of Bobsy, until he could use his fingers. Then he staggered with the leader to the head of the team and tied the tracers to the rings in Tuktuk's harness. This took him many minutes—this and the return to the sled. He lay down so that the rear of the sled would afford him a slight protection from the breeze, thrust his freezing hands into the breast pouch of his stout parka and tried to speak the word of command to go. No sounds came from his throat, he thought, but the finer senses of his four loving servants needed none. They knew him to be in the sled, and when he settled down and moved no longer they started away.

Knight felt the sled moving. He knew the dogs would not wander from that fresh, deep track. They were cold, hungry, the way was long. He did not know if they would encounter obstacles which, without his help—help given them on the journey outward bound—they could not pull. If not, and they stopped—well, they would all die then. But at least he had tried. Perhaps—when found, some time—at least they would write to her and tell her he had been coming back—back to her—to face—like a man——

Dreams, dreams—and suddenly, with a spoon forced between his lips, he came to himself and knew the dogs had won. Later he learned they had made the river below Candle and there, unable to mount the steep bank, had howled, loud and persistently, until help came.

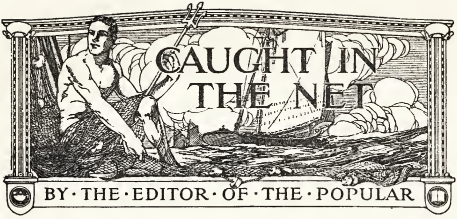
The next day, when the man who acted as doctor of the mining settlement of Candle, pronounced him fit for converse, Marshal Ed Hollister paid him a visit, and, after remarking that "Stampedin' without grub or blankets" was a fool trick and not worthy an old-timer like George Knight, drew out an envelope with money orders aggregating a thousand dollars and laid it upon the medicine table.

The man who had come back to fight life once more stared at it bewilderedly. Whereat Hollister, relishing the situation, explained.

"We've had our eye on Wilson for some time. We don't hold the Monaco management responsible—at least we have no proof. But when we broke into Wilson's room that night—the night you left—and found a phony faro box, a box with the prettiest little serpent's fang of a 'tell' in it I ever saw, we pinched him and gave back what money we could identify. *Huh!* Judgin' from the claims that was made by persons insisting they was robbed, you'd have expected to find Cold-eye had a billion dollars cached somewheres in his room, or in the holler of his faro-table legs. You—you're lucky! No chance not to know who *that* thousand dollars belonged to. Looks like you was intendin', judgin' from the address on that envelope, to send it——"

"I was," said Knight. "Ed, you mail it for me, will you?—right now!"

More Solomons stories in early issues.



CAUGHT IN THE NET

BY · THE · EDITOR · OF · THE · POPULAR

JAPAN'S POPULATION PROBLEM

THERE are too many people in Japan for its size. The country can support only a certain number, and such a condition among the natives of any land always produces one of two things: either they emigrate to other less populous regions, or a war is fomented and, if the war is successful, territory from the enemy ultimately annexed.

Japan has more than a half million of her children living abroad. The last reliable statistics gave 134,000 Japanese in China, including South Manchuria; 120,000 in the Hawaiian Islands; about the same number in the United States as in Hawaii; but less than 50,000 in all of South America.

And here is the rub. Both Brazil and Peru, for instance, would welcome Japanese immigrants, and they would meet with every assistance as colonizers. But the Jap is not a true colonizer. That is, he has no fancy for the primeval wilderness, and does not relish being the hewer of forests, the pioneer road and city builder. What he really prefers is seeking a livelihood in a civilized region, and hence he casts longing eyes on America, especially California, Hawaii, Australia and similarly settled regions. Nor can he be blamed for preferring the advantages of the softer, easier job. Frontier life has no lure for the gentle Japanese, as was proved in Siberia some years ago. The twenty or thirty thousand who took up living there never became a part of the land and its established institutions. They always maintained a transient attitude, and their work was principally that of traders. In other words, they never mixed. A Tokyo paper recently touched on this phase of Japanese character, and said:

> The chief defect of our—Japan's—emigrants has been that they did not want to settle permanently in those countries where they went in search of a livelihood, and, therefore, have sent their earnings back to Japan. It is, therefore, natural that they do not acquire a permanent foothold abroad. If they wish at all to settle in a foreign land, they should learn to love it as dearly as their own original home.

We learn from good authority that the Japanese government is entering upon the propaganda work of urging its people—at least those who wish to emigrate—to seek South America, where opportunity awaits the sturdy pathfinder; and it will have to inculcate in them that they must help build the cities to be, assist in the creation of all the facilities of civilization which shall be brought into being, rather than expect them prepared and ready for exploitation.

It is a hard job for Japan, especially as its countrymen hate to leave the land of their birth under any circumstances, and cling tenaciously to the slightest anchorage they may have at home. But the population pressure grows, and economic necessity knows no law, so let them fare forth wisely, if sadly, and really resolve to help make a new world for themselves and their children.

OUR OLYMPIC VICTORY

FOR the eighth time the track-and-field athletes of the United States have matched their speed, strength and skill against the ability of the athletes of the rest of the world in the Olympic Games, and for the eighth time they have won the Olympic championship—which means the championship of the world.

There is no official method of scoring the Olympic track-and-field events, but reckon it as you please, America won. According to the French system of awarding ten points to the winner of each event, and five, four, three, two and one respectively to the winners of the next five places, the United States scored 255 points, to Finland's 166 and Great Britain's 85½, with the rest of the field away back in the ruck. Figured in accordance with the American system of scoring, our margin of victory would have been even greater. If the English custom of counting only winners were followed the United States still would win, but by a much smaller margin—twelve first places to Finland's ten and Great Britain's three.

As had been expected, America's main strength was in the sprints, the hurdles and the field events. We did not win a single individual flat race longer than the 200 meters. Finland was unbeatable in the distance runs, and Great Britain regained some of her vanished athletic glory by winning the 400 and 800 meters events, in addition to the 100 meters, which American sport followers had considered a certain first place for the United States.

The outstanding individual star of the games was Paavo Nurmi, the record-smashing Finn who won the 1,500 and 5,000 meters flat races and the 10,000 meters cross country, and led the field home in the 3,000 meters team race. Close at his heels came another flying Finn, Willie Ritola, who won the 10,000 meters flat race and won second place in three other races. The United States had double winners in Harold Osborne, who won the high jump and the decathlon, and Clarence Houser, who won the shot put and the discus throw.

No important athletic event would be complete without a startling upset, and the Olympics provided one when Harold Abrahams, the English sprinter, led the supposedly unbeatable American "big four"—Scholz, Bowman, Paddock and Murchison—to the tape in the 100 meters. The winning of the 400 meters race by Eric Liddell, the Scotch divinity student who resigned his chances in the 100 meters rather than run on Sunday, also was unexpected. To turn the trick Liddell had to break the world's record.

The games also gave American athletic followers a severe disappointment. Joie Ray had been expected to measure strides with Nurmi in the 1,500 meters, and many Americans expected him to beat the great Finn. But the coaches did not enter Ray in the 1,500—wisely, as it turned out—and when he challenged Nurmi in the 3,000 meters team race the Finlander disposed of him in a single lap, Ray, apparently all in, dropping back and finishing next to last.

REWARDING THE RESERVE

IT is a pretty well-established principle of business that the man who gets—or tries to get—something for nothing, usually ends by getting no more than his money's worth. In its relations with a considerable body of citizenry loosely designated as the Organized Reserve, the Federal government has invited, and is now witnessing, the working out of the principle of something for nothing.

In theory, the reserve of the regular army provides a nearly ideal solution to our problem of preparedness for defense. It furnishes the nation with a great body of citizens selected for physical and moral fitness and trained for military proficiency. In practice, however, the idea is not working. The reserve is actually composed of a paltry handful of enlisted men, and many thousand officers. The enlisted contingent is so small that it may be considered for practical purposes nonexistent. The commissioned contingent is large, and, for the moment, capable; but year by year its value decreases. It is composed of veterans of the recent war and of graduates of summer training camps and university training corps.

The theory is that these reserve officers, having qualified for commissions, in the first instance, will take advantage of facilities provided by the regular army to maintain and increase their military value. But the experience of the war department is that the reserve officer accepts his commission and—forgets it. The reserve is proving a huge disappointment.

No wonder. The principle of something for nothing is working out. The reserve officer holds his life at the instant disposal of his country. In return he gets a piece of cheaply printed parchment and—an opportunity to learn how he may sacrifice his life efficiently when the time comes. The idea is patriotic. But patriotism languishes in time of peace. The reserve officer has himself to think of. He must earn a living. He wants a bit of fun in life. The government offers him nothing in return for such military drudgery as he may elect to undertake during spare time. He is not paid—excepting at encampments. He receives none of the civic exemptions that the national guardsman, for instance, enjoys. He must purchase his own equipment, even his own military textbooks.

No wonder the reserve is languishing. It will languish until it dies completely unless the government makes it worth a citizen's while to sacrifice time and energy in the interest of national security.

LUCK

THERE must be something in luck after all! Charles M. Schwab, whose extraordinary rise from obscure poverty to industrial preëminence always seemed to us proof positive that man is superior to fate, says there is something in it! He stated recently that in all his activities he made it a point to do business with men who were lucky. That sounds like a tip straight from headquarters.

Now we come to think of it, we have heard somewhere that Napoleon was a believer in luck. He is reputed to have elevated many a general on the basis of his faith in the lucky man. With Napoleon it was not sufficient to be a firm disciplinarian, a sound organizer, a magnetic leader, and a brilliant tactician. His right-hand men must have a record for good fortune besides. This, again, looks like a tip from headquarters.

Nevertheless, we are not yet ready to believe in luck as a principle. Everybody, of course, encounters sudden coincidences that may temporarily alter the trend of a logically planned train of circumstances. But we insist that they are only coincidences. We still insist that the vast majority of opportunities are made by men, that the vast majority of disasters are avoided or mended by deliberate mental and moral intervention. We deny that chance can make a weakling strong or that fate can permanently injure a strong man determined to trample on it.

The answer to the lucky man, we think, is in the man himself. Baseball players will tell you that nine out of every ten so-called "lucky breaks" can be traced back to the rapidity with which teams as a whole or individual players on those teams react to situations. It is so with the "lucky breaks" of life. Some men can analyze complicated situations in a flash, subconsciously, and react with greater certainty and rapidity than other men. Sometimes they are born with a talent for this, sometimes they train themselves until they have the faculty. However they come by it, the fact is that they have it. And by that much they are superior to their fellows. Mr. Schwab says "they get the breaks." Yes. But, we should like to point out, they have learned how to recognize a "break" when they see it, how to "get" it when they have recognized it, and how to use it when they have gotten it. Lucky for them, of course, that they have learned this trick.

POPULAR TOPICS

THE justly famed march of progress keeps right on parading toward efficiency and away from picturesqueness. Even the unchanging sea is changing—or at least the language and customs of the men who go down to it in ships are changing. To the naval gob of to-day the time-honored order "port your helm" means nothing at all. The order now is "left seven degrees." A veteran merchant skipper has predicted that some day ships will be navigated by wireless from navigation offices in city buildings.

The newest change from the old deep-sea way of doing and expressing things will go into effect on the first of next year. The sea is to have a twenty-four-hour day. It will start at midnight and end at one minute after 23.59 o'clock the next night.

This change in the official tables of the "Nautical Almanac" will simplify the keeping of ships' logs, but it will take away much of the charm of those most fascinating of all travel books. No longer will we read entries such as "Six bells in the evening watch. Sighted schooner making heavy weather over starboard bow." Instead there will be a businesslike "23.15 o'clock. Schooner in sight over left bow"—or will it be "front?"

And, before many years have passed, sea fiction dealing with American ships will be full of such phrases as "Mister Mate, pipe all hands for ginger ale at seventeen o'clock."

THE Federal government will spend seventy-five million dollars for building good roads in the United States during the fiscal year that started on July 1st. The States which will receive this aid will spend an equal amount. Texas will receive the largest sum from the government—almost four and one-half million dollars. New York, Illinois and Pennsylvania will receive over three million dollars each. Federal plans call for the construction or improvement of 170,000 miles of highway by 1934, at a total cost of almost 900 million dollars. Sixty thousand miles of highway already have been completed.

INTEREST in good roads in America is not confined to the United States. Not long ago the members of the Pan-American Highway Commission, thirty-eight delegates from twenty Latin-American countries, visited the government's Arlington Experimental Farm in Virginia to study American road-building methods, and later toured the Eastern States for the purpose of studying highway and transportation problems.

THIS is the month of the hay-fever addict's delight, and the sound of the sneeze is heard in the land.

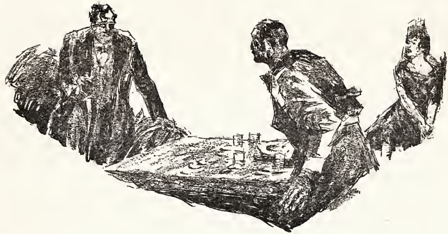
There are two sorts of hay-fever proprietors—the plutocratic sort who have the time and money to take their ailment to the mountains and do their sneezing in the great open spaces; and the sort who have to do their sneezing wherever they happen to be.

Sneezing, some arbiter of etiquette who never has experienced the delights of hay fever has decided, is impolite. Therefore Doctor Paul Farez of Paris has suggested various ways of gracefully stopping a sneeze.

If you happen to be in a crowded trolley car and feel the warning tingling, take off your shoes and stockings and tickle the souls of your feet. Should this procedure be impractical, puff out your cheeks, press on your eyeballs and contract the forehead and eyebrows. Other methods suggested by Doctor Farez are contracting the lips as much as possible and blowing hard, rubbing the jaws, pressing the upper lip with a finger, and stretching the neck. If people think you are crazy it is their mistake.

On the other hand, the doctor admits that it is far better to enjoy a hearty sneeze than to stifle it. Therefore we hope that all fellow hay-fever victims will follow their natural impulses. A slight opening of the mouth and a twitching of the nose should be sufficient warning to bystanders to take cover. Then——

"If that be sneezin'," as Patrick Henry would have been quoted if he had been suffering from hay fever when he made his famous speech, "make the most of it!"



Galahad of Lost Eden

By William West Winter

Author of "The Toss of a Coin," "A Damsel in Distress," Etc.

III.—BLUE JOHN RIGHTS A WRONG.

Blue John's mind is full of medieval hokum, the result of having steeped his young imagination in poems and pieces about the chivalric doings of King Arthur and the high-handed gentlemen of the Round Table; but there is nothing antiquated about his method with a six-gun. In that respect he is everything that modern efficiency requires.

THE teamster stopped at Pivot Rock on his next trip, not only to rest himself and his horses overnight, but to deliver to the ranger some mail which his supervisor had forwarded. In one of the envelopes was his rather meager salary check, six weeks overdue, from the district office.

"They don't pay us any too much for the services we render," he remarked, not complainingly, but with humorous resignation. "Keeping two horses up all the time except in winter, feeding them and myself, and providing equipment, all eat into it so that by the time a check is cashed it has shrunk to nothing."

Well—said the steamster—you ain't the only one to suffer that a way, nor is Uncle Sam the only niggardly employer. Take this George Rayfield, for example, who used to run the stage from Verde to Jerome, the Montezuma restaurant and hotel in Verde, and indulge in the cattle-and-sheep business on the side. Him that was the employer of the Holy Grail of "Blue John" Adams, whom I've elucidated to you more than once.

George was not, you might say, such a bad fellow, but he was certainly proximious, if you follow my meaning. He was born magnetic, so to speak, and the way he clung to a dollar or other coin of the realm was some scandalous. Consequently, he never did pay no more wages than he could help to any one unfortunate enough to work for him. There were sports, like Pete Murdock, the stage driver, or Andy Helmick, one of his cow-punchers, who were sufficiently wise and long of horn to cope with George. They got what you-all might call respectable emoluments out of him, George knowing full well that should he attempt any shaving of perquisites and annuities with them they would come around and argue the matter with him with more force than manners.

But Hilda Raffe ain't no violent and

shell-barked native raised on cactus spines and cutting her teeth on the front sight of a six-shooter. She is alien and timid, not to say unsophisticated a whole lot, and she hails from lands where a dollar looks as big as a wagon wheel and ten of them together at the same time appears like a fortune. So when she goes to work with Rayfield, and he offers her board and room with fifteen pesos a month over and above it to call her very own, she has visions at first of getting rich and going back home to buy a title for herself. However, she soon dispels them illusions when she comes to purchase waitress uniforms and high-heeled shoes imported via me from Flagstaff at three cents a pound freight charges besides what the railroads add before ever they come into my charge. Besides which, she discovers, after she has grown accustomed to the atmosphere of Arizona, that Rayfield consistently violates all eight-hour regulations, union or otherwise, and that he expects her to be on the job from five thirty a. m. in summer to nine p. m.

The scullery job is in the hands of a Piute squaw and the cook is a Chinese, while the last waitress George had has departed on him without more than forty-eight hours' notice, to elope with one of "Windy Mose" Scott's horse wranglers. So Hilda hasn't much opportunity to engage in comparisons with others similarly situated. Still, what with hearing this and that as she skates flapjacks and fried hog around from guest to guest, she gradually picks up some savvy and comes to the conclusion that she's hardly more nor less than a wage slave.

Still, she is grateful to George for taking her in and extending protection to her, and I will say for him that he means well by her, barring it don't cost him too much. George is a middle-aged and acquisitive citizen, and not a bad-looking hombre, but he has never got married because he figures that it is an expensive habit and leads to reductions of net profits which would distress him a whole lot. In consequence of looking so intently and fondly and for such a long time at the classic profile of the goddess on the coin of the realm he has gotten a heap myopic when it comes to any and all other female charms. He gets writer's cramp every time he signs a check and the only time the ink flows free from the point of his pen is when he's entering an amount on a deposit slip.

The Basco chuck purveyor for Rayfield's sheep camps is this fellow Mario of whom I spoke not so long ago. Mario is one of those who has lived long enough to understand taking care of himself and he, besides Murdock and Helmick, manages to gather sufficient moss from Rayfield. It has not always been so, for there is a time when Rayfield first hires him because he can get him at less than a Mexican's wages. But Mario is no sooner ensconced in charge of Rayfield's sheep than he proceeds to import sundry citizens of his own persuasion to assist him in the job. As they are the best sheep wranglers in the world and are so constituted that they don't go more than moderately crazy from associating with their charges, George is plumb glad to hire them as Mario introduces them. They work cheap enough, too, but when Mario has succeeded in placing them in charge of all Rayfield's flocks, he naturally assumes the position of foreman, seeing that no one can talk to them but himself. Following which, sabotage begins to develop and sheep don't increase in no way like they ought to. The upshot of it is, that this reformed smuggler from Europe proposes to George, as a means of stopping losses, a sort of contract system by which he gets a salary and an appropriation with which to hire herders. How much the herders get out of this no one ever does know, but Mario soon begins to wax prosperous to such a degree that Rayfield gets envious and undertakes to cut his wages. It don't work, because, while Mario smiles agreeable at the suggestion, the very next tally of the flocks shows a hundred per cent increase in loss by straying and coyotes, which would more than cover Mario's wages. Rayfield sees the light right quick and don't make no more plays to mulct this alien of his increment.

But Hilda is a different matter and fifteen dollars is all she is ever liable to put in her lisle threads while she works for Rayfield, though otherwise he treats her in a commendable manner. In due time this fact begins to irk her considerable, especially when it dawns on her that, as a lone and handsome female in central Arizona, she has a value all her own and separate entirely from her usefulness as a purveyor of sinkers and fried hen fruit. To begin with, there isn't any woman who doesn't harbor ambitions to shine in male society regardless, nor who doesn't distrust her ability to dazzle unadorned with anything but her natural charms. Leastways, I never saw such nor ever met any who had.

In addition to this, Hilda had two devotees already anchored, in the persons of "Whistling William" and of Blue John, and the rivalry of these two—especially the methods of Blue John in wooing her—sure inveigles her a whole lot. She hasn't yet decided which of them she favors, but in the meantime it is borne in on her sensibilities that she can speed up the bloodshed and bring the slaughter to a climax by donning war paint herself. And fifteen dollars a month don't enable her to expend herself much in that direction.

She has been embellished by Blue John to the extent of a valuable diamond ring, originally the property of a drummer from Albuquerque, and it might seem to you that she could sell or pawn this and raise enough to wage a campaign, but that's because you don't know Hilda. She is honest and conscientious, and, besides, the way she comes to get this ring fills her with pique. On the way back to the Verde she more than once is on the point of taking it off from her finger and heaving it into the sage, but she is a little bit afraid that Blue John will see her and resent it, so she refrains until he has bid her a polite and affectionate farewell and headed out around Montezuma's Well and off across the Buckhorn on his way back to his hide-out in Lost Eden. Even then, she has had much time to reflect that it seems a shame to throw away a valuable rock like that.

Still, she don't regard it as hers, none whatever, and so she finally disposes of it by packing it up and mailing it back to the drummer, with a note explaining how it came into her hands. His address she gets from George Rayfield, with whom the drummer has left it for forwarding of any mail that might come for him. In the course of time she gets it back from him with a note that proves this drummer, though he isn't long on valor, is right up in the same grade as Blue John when it comes to chivalry. Which he intimates that this here ring was a free gift on his part and that, while he might have regretted it had it gone somewhere else, he is convinced that it couldn't adorn no fairer digit than hers if he searched the universe. So he begs her to accept it as a token of his own and Blue John's admiration.

But that is neither here nor there, because before she gets this communication from him there is considerable water flows down the Hassayampa. In the meantime Blue John is once more vanished into the mysterious, and she is waiting anxiously for both him and Whistling William Griffiths to show up again with further excitations. And while she waits she begins to long for adornments and to study Sears Roebuck's catalogues and inquire for Rabbitt Brothers' price lists, reflecting at the same time on the meagerness of her emoluments and beginning to rebel thereat.

But Whistling William remains missing and Blue John, while occasionally heard of, remains unseen and unmanifesting. The lawyer, Mr. Short, returns to Jerome on the next stage and as he is feeling somewhat put out over the way things have turned out, what with losing his client for a divorce and also having his chicanery in the matter of lead dollars with a Liberty head on both sides exposed, he files an information with the authorities accusing Blue John of holding up the stage. Wherefore, having nothing much to do, the grand jury down at Prescott returns against Blue John still another indictment alleging highway robbery with force of arms, in spite of the fact that Pete Murdock, when summoned, testifies point-blank that, while there might be force of arms, there wasn't no robbery. Nevertheless, Blue John now rests under charges as follows: Felonious assault in Navajo County, abduction in Gila, manslaughter and robbery in Yavapai. Besides which, there is already talk of more serious things, since the horse that Hilda has ridden in on is recognized as belonging to Whistling William, and said Whistling William is now becoming the subject for inquiry on the part of the Territorial Rangers, he having not been seen or heard of since Blue John reports to Short and Hilda having sawed off on him some one else as being Blue John. But as yet they don't know whether to charge Blue John with horse stealing or with beefing the ranger.

Things are in this state, or approaching it, when Hilda comes to the conclusion that she is underpaid. And she then sets out to correct this condition. George Rayfield is counting the day's clean-up one evening and Hilda is just finishing stripping the tables in the Montezuma. She casts one or two glances his way and sees him smiling, things having been breaking right well with him, what with good business in the restaurant, no more sheep failing to have increase, and a hundred head of feeders having brought thirty dollars a head after driving from Payson to Flagstaff. So Hilda assumes her most melting manner, shines up her big blue eyes and fluffs up her golden hair as she creeps up to the cashier's desk.

"Mr. Rayfield," says she, "I must speak to you on a matter of great import."

George looks up and smiles at her. As I remark back a piece, he isn't a bad-looking hombre at all and no more than middle aged. And he has a kind face when he isn't on the trail of money. Hilda gathers courage from the mildness of his demeanor.

"What is it, child?" asks George, benevolent a whole lot.

"It—it is the question of my wages," begins Hilda and then she gets a bit frightened as George's face drops into a frown. She hurries on while her nerve lasts.

"I must have more. I—I can't get along on the small amount you pay me. And others have told me——"

"Now listen, Miss Raffe," reproaches George in an injured voice. "Whatever do you listen to others for when you might get the right talk from me, personal, if you'd come right to me? You know I have my enemies in this camp who are envious of my standing and probity and they wouldn't never stop at calumny to set my friends against me. And among those friends I surely count you as one, seeing I have a right. It was me took you in when your own natural guardians was persecuting you and marrying you to ancient sky pilots of Mormon persuasions and the Order of Melchizedek. It was me saved you from being an object of charity and rescued you from the degradation of eating the bread of idleness by giving you the boss female job of Camp Verde. I don't wish for nor invite no efforts of gratitude therefor, and I'm plumb glad to harbor and cherish you as long as the need may exist. But when folks that ought to know better begins to fill your pretty mind with ungrateful notions toward me, I rise to remark that it's plumb unhandsome."

And here George looks plenty woebegone and wipes a surreptitious tear from out of his eye. Hilda feels her heart swell up in sympathy for him and sink again in shame for herself. But her mind is full of an organdie frock she sees in a catalogue and it retails for forty-eight dollars and sixty-eight cents plus freight from Flagstaff, while she's been working for two months and more and has only fifteen pesos sequestrated out of her wages. And between pity for George and passion for that frock, the frock wins in a canter.

"Oh, you have been a friend in need and in deed, Mr. Rayfield," she declares fervently. "And I would never demean myself by listening to your enemies. But is 'High Jack Lizzie,' the Piute squaw who massages the dishes, an enemy of yours? For Lizzie informs me in her quaint accents, that she gets twenty dollars per month, while Chong Wox, the orange-hued son of the Celestial Empire what fries the chuck out back, declares the lady who preceded me drew down no less than forty-five silver wagon wheels each and every pay day, besides getting meals and a room in the hotel as I do. Therefore it seems to me that a slight increase in my salary wouldn't noways come amiss."

"And wherefore," says George, in grief, "does that young woman, who dyes her hair and elopes shamefully with a low-down horse wrangler, get all them wages? Isn't it out of the natural softness of my heart that I pays her far more than she's worth, and it ain't no forty-five a month, either. Out of sentiment and sympathy, because she allows she is feeding an aged mother who otherwise goes to the poorhouse, do I enlarge her rightful pay until she doubles what I ever pays any one else. And she retaliates for my pity by hanging me up high and dry without no biscuit shooter at all, while she lights out with a measly bronc peeler who has two wives that I know of and maybe half a dozen more sequestrated where no one can find them. That is the return of the good Samaritan who gets blows for his charity. I might have known that it would recoil on my head when I extend my mantle to cover you in your time of need. Ingratitude, oh ingratitude, says the poet; thy name is females!" And George weeps plenty copious while Hilda's heart shrinks to the size of a piñon nut.

But she holds on stubborn to her intentions.

"But do I get a raise?" she demands in a small voice that tells George his battle is almost won. He perks up and looks sad and at the same time stern.

"It is impossible," he says with a shake of the head. "That previous Lady Ganymede has done cleaned out my profits for a year to come, what with feeding her swains and the guys that tip her with free chuck and the exorbitant remuneration she inveigles from me. Speak to me again a year come Christmas and by that time I may be able to afford a slight increase."

He gathers up his balance sheets and stalks out in all the dignity of his grief at such ingratitude, and Hilda, who is pierced to the heart, shakes the last tablecloth, wipes her eyes with it and after she has folded it up she goes weaving out to the lobby to go up to her room. But on the way the vision of that organdie departing forever from her purview overcomes her and she is so smitten with agony that she sets right down by the stove and buries her face in her apron.

Mario is sitting near by waiting for George to come out and go over his list of supplies which he is taking up on the mesa next morning. There is also a sport in the off side of the lobby who is considering Hilda as he has done ever since she comes there. This is a tinhorn who passes at this time by the name of St. John, but he allows he's English and it is pronounced Sinjin, which is a better name for him than any holy one for the reason that if singein' isn't his ultimate fate then I lose faith in the old-fashioned religion. At that, it isn't likely that he's English, but more so that he's something with Mexican ingredients in him by reason of the fact that he's plenty dark and swarthy and has a pointed mustache all waxed out like a villain in a melodrama.

This Sinjin sport has the concession from George Rayfield for running the wheel in the Montezuma and for some time he has been dwelling in a covetous style on Hilda's blue eyes and golden hair, cogitating in the meanwhile on ways and means to capture her. However, as raw plays with innocent females aren't the safest kind of relaxations in Yapapai County and environs, he goes pretty cautious with these designs and contents himself mostly with elaborations of respect and homage a whole lot, especially while Whistling William is about, he having no desire in the way of tangling with any rangers whatever.

But Whistling William isn't present now and when he sees Hilda crying softly into her apron he leaves the table and comes over. There isn't much business this early in the evening and no one else is in the lobby, so he has a clear field except for Mario, whom he and the girl don't count as anything with human understanding.

"Miss Raffe," says Sinjin, very respectful, "it appears that you labor under heavy grief. Is there any way in which I can assuage your sorrows?"

"N-no!" sobs Hilda, swabbing her orbs. "Y-you can't and no one can. I—I am *so* unhappy!"

"And whyfor are you unhappy?" asks Sinjin ingratiatingly. "Is there some sport who insults you any? If so, give me his description and I pledge that he rests in small remnants before the sun rises again."

"It—it isn't anybody!" sobs Hilda. But the sympathy that this horned toad inculcates into his voice disarms her and she is prone to sob her woes out on a friendly bosom. "It's—it's my wa-wages! I—I want a dress and—and things, and Mr. Rayfield won't pay me enough to b-buy them!"

"He won't!" ejaculates Sinjin, indignant to all seeming. "Why, the ornery skinflint! Which he could wrap you in diamonds and never feel the strain. You say the word, chiquita, and I'll saunter out and carve more than Shylock's pound of flesh off his frame for you."

And he caresses an eight-inch knife he carries of habit in the right pants pocket, in a loose sheath. There are some say that knife fighters favor tucking it down the back of their necks but it never seems to me that that's a favorable location for offense with a bowie. This fellow has his sewed into the pants pocket where he can slide it out without no waste of time and where it is entirely concealed, and it is whispered that he's right dangerous with the blade when he can get to close quarters. For other hostilities he favors a derringer.

"No! No!" wails Hilda, clutching his arm and looking as pretty as an antelope in her alarm. "Never! Mr. Rayfield has been kind to me and I could never permit any one to injure him. But, oh, if I could only earn some money!"

And right there Sinjin gets an idea which would do credit to the devil himself. He smiles and leans over and says, softly:

"Money, Miss Hilda! Why, all I have is at your disposal. You have only to tell me how much——"

But Hilda draws herself up indignantly. "Sir!" says she, "I can accept no favors from men, as you know."

Sinjin raises his hands in protest. "Favors!" says he. "I would never think of presuming, my dear lady. But there are other ways of earning money and you don't have to work for Rayfield. Why not work for me, if your pride rebels at accepting my assistance?"

"Work for you?" asks Hilda.

"Why, certainly," says Sinjin, waving back at his table. "I need a lookout and some one to handle the check rack. Where could I get one who would serve as well as you. Why, my dear, your beautiful face alone would draw custom enough to justify my paying you a hundred dollars a month."

Which it would, or two hundred either. And Hilda isn't shocked as others might have been. She's been raised in Europe where gambling isn't looked upon as sinful by all properly regulated females as it is here, and since coming to Arizona she has been sequestrated largely with menfolks who don't share the female vision none concerning it. Nor is she sophisticated concerning caste lines such as obtain in the Southwest. She don't know that there are any such, or that lady gamblers and dance-hall girls are stamped with earmarks by the masculine persuasion. It just pointedly seems to her that here is a chance for her to grab off the profits of a business which is looked upon at the time as being perfectly legitimate when it's a square game. Nor does it occur to her innocent heart that roulette don't require no lookouts nor extras for the check rack, the tinhorn who runs the wheel doing all that himself. She just envisions once more that organdie frock and grabs off this chance as a heavenly boon.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Sinjin!" she murmurs. "How can I ever express my gratitude?"

Sinjin smirks and says she don't need to, which is true enough. There is some further talk of arrangements and Hilda departs for her room to change into her other clothes and to compose her resignation from the service of George Rayfield. No, George, although he is pretty badly broken up about it, don't make no objections audibly. He has heard some of that bowie that Sinjin totes in his pants and he don't savvy that the girl don't know what she is doing. He tells himself that if she is that sort of girl, he's just as well shut of her; but at that he don't believe it in his heart.

I remind you-all that, during this exchange of confidential matters, Mario, the Basco foreman of Rayfield's sheep camps, is sitting within earshot, and it is Mario's habit to use his ears whenever there is occasion for it. Likewise, though he don't speak so good English, he savvies it a whole lot better than most folks give him credit for. In consequence, though these folks think he is negligible he goes away from there with a complete idea of what is going on.

But Mario doesn't elucidate these matters to Rayfield. He savvies George pretty accurate and he judges that he won't interfere in any matter where his assistance isn't asked, more especially when that interference embraces going up against a bowie knife or a derringer in the hands of this Sinjin sport. Still, Mario is full of sentiment, as you might say, being an alien, and he also has cottoned a whole lot to Blue John, induced thereto by his leanings toward romance in the first place and the natural sympathy he feels for one who has shared with him the hostility of the officers of the law, Mario having slain policemen in his own native haunts before ever he comes to America.

For these and perhaps other reasons which he don't expound to any one, Mario cogitates this matter diligent with the result that he sets forth the following morning for the mesa prepared to once more ally himself with Blue John. He comes in due time to the sheep camp which is nearest to Lost Eden and then sets out to get in communication with Blue John. This isn't so easy as it might look because people who frequent Lost Eden early acquire the habit of being some elusive and Blue John is no exception to that rule.

However, he figures a way to draw him which may work or not as the case may be, but in this event happens to loop the horns. He butchers a sheep and with considerable effort writes on a piece of bark a sort of sign which passes for his signature and which he knows Blue John will recognize. Although he can talk pretty fair United States he can't write it none.

He carries the carcass to a trail into Lost Eden which he has seen Blue John take once or twice though he hasn't followed it none himself, and he hangs the mutton up to a prominent limb where it can't fail to be seen by any one passing near by. Then he tacks the bark on it with an arrow to signify which direction his camp lies therefrom. He figures that Blue John will find it and appropriate it and wishing to render due thanks to the donor, will waltz in on him pronto and pass the time of day.

Blue John, as it happens, don't encounter this sheep meat none, but another hombre does in the person of one Pete Bradley, whose specialty is holding up trains. Pete is usually called "Panhandle Pete," not from comic resemblances, as you might guess, but because he originally is credited with hailing from that section of Texas. He and Blue John aren't anyways intimate because Blue John don't favor associating with professional criminals none and keeps much to himself. However, Panhandle Pete is curious regarding Blue John and, since the hue and cry after himself has died down of late, he is projecting some fresh enterprise or other and he wishes to size up Blue John with the idea of possibly enlisting him in his next nefarious excursion.

First off, when he encounters this mutton hanging there like a gift from the angels, he just gathers it in without thought of anything but the next meal. But as he fries himself a chop or two he gets to thinking that it may perhaps give him the entrée to Blue John's society, which he covets. If he comes prouncing in on John with no excuse nor apology, he is likely to get a heap perforated before he can explain the peaceableness of his intentions. But if he can open negotiations at a distance and hold out fresh mutton as a proof of his bony fidies, he calculates that Blue John will probably listen for at least a few minutes before shaking the loads out of his gun in the direction of Panhandle Pete.

Sure, he knows where John's hide-out is located. Likewise John knows where Panhandle holes up. While they don't associate none, neither can afford to neglect little points of knowledge like that in their situation and so they practice scouting on each other and such other ladrones as Lost Eden harbors at the time plenty diligently.

Fresh meat is more of a need in Blue John's camp than it is in Pete's, because John has scruples that a way regarding property rights in beef and mutton which totally escape Pete. John, unless he's pressed by absolute necessity, don't ever steal no meat, but Pete regards such inhibitions as plumb puerile. So when Pete sets out to scout up to John's camp with the mutton he goes pretty confident that John is hungry for flesh and will enter into negotiations.

In this he isn't deceived a whole lot. He Mohawks up to the camp on hands and knees and lets out a cry like a squinch owl before he's within gun range, to warn Blue John that he's on his way. Then he sneaks from cover to cover as near as he dares and lets out the call for parley. By this time John is ensconced securely behind a clump of giant ferns, completely invisible but commanding the front, while at the back is a cliff and he covers a crevice in it through which, at a pinch, he can crab it backward to his rear. He has his carbine, which he has garnered from Whistling William, the Territorial Ranger, trained in the direction from which the signals come, but he don't see no one to shoot at right away, as Pete keeps well hid.

When Pete shouts that he comes in peace and with gifts in his hands in the shape of mutton, John has to listen. He is suffering from lack of real food to some extent and is just calculating on an expedition to knock him over a deer if such can be found when this interpolation intrigues him. The upshot of it is that he agrees to call a truce on condition that Panhandle leaves his gun out of camp; and they gather at the fire with John maintaining proper vigilance and his weapons while Pete is plumb unarmed.

John cooks up a mess of spare ribs for them both and they begin to feed with an access of friendliness. But John is still conscientious and he won't negotiate none until he knows how Pete comes by this sheep. Whereupon Pete describes his finding of it in detail, and John knows he wouldn't have sense enough to invent no such tale, and believes him.

However, Pete produces the bark in further proof and Blue John at once recognizes Mario's mark and guesses that the sheep has been left for him. He determines to call and extend his appreciations even if it has fallen to the wrong party, and in the meantime, so as not to have Pete on his trail any, he remains noncommittal to that party's proposals that they team up together and conspire against the peace and dignity of the commonwealth. He allows Pete to retreat with an intimation that he'll think it over and maybe return his call in a few days, even going so far as to arrange peace signals for the approach to Pete's camp.

But as soon as Pete has gone, Blue John drags his rope and hits the high spots for Mario's camp, arriving there in time to share another Basco Irish stew, amid cordial welcomes from the sheep-herders. And then Mario breaks the news to him regarding Hilda Raffe and her financial troubles.

"Those is little pay she get from Mister Rayfield," he tells Blue John. "Not sufficient for the purchase of the dress and the shoe. And those Rayfield, he will not pay her more. So when those gambling man offer the much money to her for making the lookout with him, she do not know better than to accept. But me, I think of my friend the great Blue Johnny, who so loafs that lady with the yellow hair, and I says to myself, it is a damn shame that she should lack for the dress and the shoe. If the great Blue Johnny know of it he come in here with his gun and he shoot merry hell out of Rayfield and the Sinjin gentleman, and make them buy the yellow lady all the dress and shoe she can use. For is not the yellow lady the chosen of Blue Johnny and has he not through me, Mario, given notice to all that he claims her for his alone? Yes, of a truth, for I have myself nailed up the writing in which this is written."

"And you're sure shouting your head off, Mario," says Blue John. "I rest under a debt of gratitude to you and I repay it whenever the times are propitious. You have enabled me to once more set out to demonstrate in behalf of this young lady all the chivalry that wells within me. And it sure is welling aplenty, as this Sinjin sport and George Rayfield are liable to discover before they add any more rings to their horns.

"Fifteen dollars a month!" he goes on, groaning in distress. "Whyever don't I know before this that this skinflint has been deleting her remunerations like this? Which if she has her rights she'd be enjoying the total income and increments pertaining to this short sport Rayfield, and more besides; and then she'd be underpaid. However, thanks to you, Mario, my eyes are at last opened and I now sets forth to pry the blinkers off of the orbs of Rayfield, Sinjin, *et al.*"

Saying which, he finishes his visit and lines it back to camp. But now it appears to him that he's going up against odds when he sets out to beard Rayfield and Sinjin in their den with all the Verde behind them to back them up. He turns over matters in his mind and decides he'd better have an ally. The only ally available is Panhandle Pete, and while it goes against his convictions to enlist a criminal, he don't see no way out of it. Consequently he ends up by tracking Pete down to his lair and giving the signal previously agreed upon, whereupon Pete raises the hand of peace and welcome, palm out, and invites him in.

"It is this way, Pete," says Blue John when they get down to cases. "Which I ain't averse to joining hands with you providing the enterprise entered upon suits my tastes. But what do I know about you beside the fact that you specializes in holding up trains inhabited and infested with tourists who goes plumb loco at the very sight of a gun? To my mind such knowledge don't embrace the important and necessitous factors that governs the associations of outlaws like we-all. It don't elucidate to me how much sand you got in your craw for the reason that it don't take no valor whatever to loot tourists that travel on trains, and train crews ain't paid to resist road agents but to run the trains. Now I refuse to tie to any hombre who isn't tested in the smoke and hasn't shown me that he can walk right up to the mouth of a gun and chew the lead out of the shells. And you must admit that no such test has been applied to you-all."

"I might say the same for you," says Pete, indignant. "Whoever do you ever frighten except a Swede that is too slow to dent butter and a lawyer sharp that never knew a trigger from a belt buckle? Which I hate to boast, but I assure you that I regard my profession as an art and I practice it not so much for gains, which are slender at best, but for the pleasure and excitement I get out of terrorizing multitudes with my single gun."

"All of which is wind in the trees," says Blue John. "We might settle this controversy by pacing off thirty yards and swinging down on each other, but that would deprive one or other of us of a possibly valued ally in future. Therefore I propose that we arrange a mutual test and, as snow is due to fly before long, we lose no time about it."

"Name your eliminations and I'll mount her bareback and ride her straight up," declares Pete confidently. He is not such a bad sport when one comes to know him and Blue John even begins to place credit in that boast that he robs trains mostly as a sporting proposition. He feels himself beginning to harbor affections toward this Panhandle party.

"There is a tinhorn with a wheel over to the Verde," he suggests, "who is a personal foe of mine. Likewise he is likely to carry some small change in his safe for the exigencies of his business. The inhabitants of the Verde are said to be rough and riotous and hard to curry and I suggests we canter over there to-morrow, hiding out till sundown, and then put our courage to the test by riding in to the Montezuma and holding this wheel up if the time looks ripe."

"I rise to that and votes a unanimous approval," says Pete. "And it's evident that there's nothing mercenary in my vote because it isn't likely that a Verde Valley wheel has a bank roll of more than a thousand pesos behind it. Those Verde sharps does business almost exclusively by check on Prescott banks and there is little coin of the realm in their war bags."

"Then it's a go," says John. "But before we enters into this raid I specify that we first look over the layout and see how the wheel is rolling. I have a personal matter to settle with this tinhorn sport and I intend to buck his tiger and himself before there is a move to clean out the rack. And another thing to remember is that wherever any female enters the play she is to be treated with distinguished respect and consideration. Otherwise this alliance ends in hostilities between the parties thereto without no further notice."

Pete is indignant. "Whoever insinuates that I yield to any sport in Arizona in my attitude toward the ladies, can go for his gun right now," he declares and crooks his trigger finger in preparation. But Blue John waves the challenge aside.

"If that's understood," he says, "we can get ready to start."

They set out early, riding it easy to rest their horses, and it is nearing sundown when they come out on the flats above Camp Verde and work down with the laterals of the ditches toward the town. No one notices them in particular nor does their appearance in the camp arouse any recognitions, since it is getting dark and Blue John isn't such a frequent visitor that they spot him at sight. Not more than half a dozen of the Verde folks has ever seen him, in fact, barring cow-punchers who rode with him out Showlow way from time to time and they are mostly riding now and far from town. As for Panhandle Pete, he never operates near the Verde and is plumb unknown there.

Therefore they have no difficulty in hoisting a meal at a Chinese restaurant and passing the time in sizing up the layout until it is time to make their play. And here Blue John makes a suggestion.

"In the get-away," he says, "it is always best to separate and give them two trails to follow. One man can shake pursuit easier than two and if they split to follow each, it makes it a comparative cinch. Therefore, when we ride away, I suggest that you-all head up around Montezuma's Well and over Buckhorn, crossing Clear Creek up at the head and circling back to Lost Eden. I, in the meantime, will head up over the Verde where Clear Creek comes in and strike the trail out over the *mal pais* and down into Fossil Creek, from there loping through Strawberry and up the Rim to the mesa, where I'll easily make Lost Eden and rejoin you."

To this, which is common sense, Pete agrees, and since it has gone quite dark and the Montezuma is beginning to fill up, they proceed to their nefarious plots. They walk into the lobby where, at one side, Sinjin is operating his wheel, with Hilda Raffe sitting up behind him in a new dress and a pair of shoes with rhinestone buckles on them, looking as puzzled at what it is all about as though she never did see a wheel in her life. And it is beginning to dawn upon her, perhaps, that she is apparently there for purely ornamental purposes and for the delectation of Sinjin, for she has nothing to do but sit and listen to the occasional insidious whispers of affection he is beginning to pass to her.

There are two or three small players at the wheel when John and Pete draw up to it and at first no one pays any attention to them. John lays down a dollar and buys a stack while Pete just looks on at his elbow. In the meantime, they have previously spotted George Rayfield laboring in the restaurant checking up the day's cleanup and lamenting the fact that he has lost his biscuit shooter. The restaurant looks onto the lobby and the alcove where the wheel is set up.

Hilda is paying little attention to the wheel but is busy reflecting on one or two hints Sinjin has already given her to the effect that her job is a sinecure, not to say a charitable play on his part and that she is in his debt for the price of a dress and shoes. She is also puzzling over the change in the regard which the men of Camp Verde has hitherto showed for her. Not that they are actually insulting, being in some awe of Sinjin and his peeling knife, but they are beginning to talk free and outspoken in her presence and to display humor which is not of the boudoir variety without no regard to her presence. And she isn't so unsophisticated that she doesn't sense the reasons therefor.

She is beginning to be uneasy a whole lot and to regret even her former status as Rayfield's biscuit shooter, when she happens to hear a word of exasperation from Blue John, who has lost two bits on the double zero. She starts and bends a glance at him and with difficulty she represses a shriek.

But Blue John simply looks at her as if he never sees her before.

"Whatever is this lady doing perched up here overlooking my play?" he says peevishly. "Which it never was etiquette in the parts where I was raised to have females horning in on a gamble."

Sinjin bends a severe eye upon him and answers shortly:

"This lady is lookout for the game," he expounds. "She is here to lend her inspiration to the game and to overlook any attempts at petty pilfering of chips by such pikers as comes in here kicking because they drops a whole nickel in an hour."

"How is that?" says Blue John, very softly. But Hilda just then sees Sinjin reaching stealthily toward his pocket and she precipitates matters by emitting a shriek.

"Oh! Look out!" she cries, sudden and vociferous.

Now Sinjin has been a heap irritated by slow progress with Hilda, which he can't help seeing, and he has been imbibing some of Rayfield's fire water, which makes him more than ordinarily quarrelsome. He has been annoyed at Blue John's cautious and puerile play and at his grumblings over losing, with occasional insinuations that there is something wrong with the wheel. But still, it appears that his move toward his pants pocket was originally merely a precaution or maybe a threat toward one whom he regards as a short sport. But when Hilda utters her warning he is startled, taking it to be meant for himself, whereas it is really aimed at Blue John. And, as hesitation in his business frequent leads to decease, he whips out his knife and lunges at Blue John.

He gets home, too, with a point against the fifth rib where it glances down and off his side as Blue John turns, ripping out a strip of meat. Blue John has been caught unawares as he glances at Hilda when she screams, but he loses no time now. He swings one fist to Sinjin's jaw and knocks him plumb out of knife range. As he is staggering backward, Sinjin grabs for his derringer, but Blue John is already arking his gun and before Sinjin can level it the smoke is clouding the landscape and the tinhorn's soul is departing from thence under cover of it.

And Pete is noways behind. His gun is out and waving the crowd back against the wall with hands reaching against the plaster. Hilda utters violent screams and starts to faint, but Blue John, raging like a lion, reaches and drags her down with a hand at her wrist.

"I'm giving notice again, you Verde sharps!" he cries above the uproar. "You have derided or ignored previous warnings, to allow this young lady to be degraded and inveigled by horned toads of this species. You have stood by while Shylocks like Rayfield starves and enslaves her and you have made no protest. Now, I, Blue John, am here to see that her wrongs are righted and you all stand still where you are until the righting is done."

Thereupon he stalks into the restaurant where George Rayfield is sitting with mouth open and eyes staring through the doors at Pete and his gun and the customers lined up at the wall. And Blue John plants the trembling, half-fainting Hilda right in front of him.

"You, Rayfield, whatever do you mean by employing my lady fiancée as a measly biscuit shooter?" he roars. "Speak quick and explain yourself. "Why did you drive her in her innocence to the degradation of companioning with a low-down tinhorn, all same like a dance-hall filly, because you all can't bear to part with living wages? Answer before I beef you entirely." And he waves his gun before the terrified Rayfield.

"I—I never did! I—I mean I won't never do it any more!" stutters George abjectly. He sees Pete through the door emptying the drawer of the roulette wheel without ever lifting his gun from the line-up at the wall. He is praying alternately for his life and for his money, which both appear to be at stake.

"You're damn shouting you won't never do it again!" says Blue John, who is a gory sight with the blood soaking through his shirt and seeping down on the floor. "Get down from that cage!" And George scrambles down with a groan, anticipating that John will clean out the drawer as Pete has done. But John merely motions Hilda up to the chair behind the cage.

"There, my lady fair," says he, "is your rightful place in this establishment. You are cashier of this hash house and if Rayfield don't back my play I'll canter in here and offer him up as a sacrifice. Your salary is a hundred and fifty a month and it is to be paid pronto on each and every opening day. If it ain't forthcoming send word to me and I'll come down and ask the reason why."

Hilda cringes and looks at George, who is wringing his hands. And Blue John also looks, his pale face grinning at him, some triumphant and menacing.

"Yes! Oh, yes, my dear!" stutters Rayfield hastily. "Everything that this gentleman says I agree to. You are cashier and your salary is anything you say."

"Remember it, then," says John and turns to Hilda. He lifts his left hand and takes hers, as cold and clammy as that of a fish if fishes have hands, all trembling as it is, and he kisses it devoutly. Then, with a low and deferential bow to her and a scowl for Rayfield, he backs out, gives the sign to Pete and they crab it out the door with leveled guns and jump to their horses. In another second the dust rolls under their hoofs, and departing, one at each end of the street, they leave the swarming hive of Camp Verde behind them.

Hilda, as soon as John is gone, tremblingly offers to come down and resign. But George Rayfield deters her hurriedly.

"No!" No!" he shouts, pushing her back into the seat. "Do you want to have my blood on your hands? Cashier you are and cashier you remain as long as that homicidal and locoed maniac is at large. Don't you ever dare to protest against it or offer to resign until he his hanging on the gallows down at Tucson."

So Hilda, the Holy Grail, gets her raise in salary and assumes her position in Camp Verde, while Blue John hoofs it over the flats and the *mal pais* toward Fossil Creek with a jagged groove in his side where Sinjin's knife has cut him. But he don't leave any blood for the reason that, after wading the Verde, his shirt clots the wound, and he leaves no tracks because he heads straight across the *mal pais*. Likewise he's lucky because every one takes off after Panhandle Pete, who goes the other way.

Another story of this series in the next number.

REVENGE!

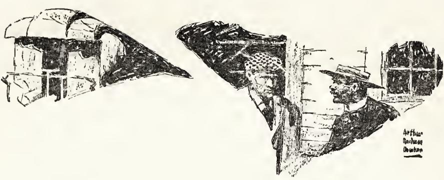
MASTER WILLIAM had had a toothache all night. The diseased molar had thumped, throbbed and thudded. It had done a fandango inside his twisted face. It had buckjumped up and down the hollow spaces of his head. Assuming the shape and mannerisms of authority, it had yanked him forth from the friendliness of his sheets and led him moaning and lamenting to and fro in his room. It had made him do pain's pilgrimage from cellar to garret. It had tuned his outcries to nine octaves of anguish, agony and woe.

Morning came. Willie's parents came. Willie's parents' friends came. And under the pressure of their combined threats, promises and persuasions, he went to the dentist's and had the hollow, aching tooth screamingly torn from its bony resting place.

After that, Willie made a request. "Please," he said in a thickened voice, "may I have that tooth?"

Handing him the offending member, the dentist asked why he wanted it.

"I'm going to take it home," replied Willie, "cram it full of sugar, and watch it ache."



The Championess

By W. O. McGeehan

Author of "The Cauliflower Ear," "The Iron Fist," Etc.

"And so passed 'Bullet' Hansen, staggering but always pressing forward. His fighting soul blazed to the last—malevolent but splendid."

THE lithograph of John L. Sullivan in a tarnished gilt frame had stood over the old-fashioned mantelpiece in the dining room of the Dolan home ever since a certain miraculous happening. To Jeremiah Dolan the presence of that picture converted the dining room into something resembling a chapel. It was as though the grim old gladiator had become the patron saint of the house.

Jeremiah Dolan had begun to tell the tale of the picture to his daughter, Nora, when she was three. Nora did not remember her mother. Jeremiah had been made a widower shortly after she was born.

"It was this way, Nora darling," Jeremiah would begin. "The great John L. was making his first trip to San Francisco and I went down to see him. They took the horses out of his carriage and they pulled him themselves to the Palace Hotel. Your father was one of the men that helped. Never did the lord leftenant himself get such a welcome, for it was real.

"When we pulled the carriage up to the door the great John L. himself looked us all over. 'Thank ye, boys,' says he. 'I'm proud of the reception ye gave me. Little man,' he says to me, 'ye can tell your children and your grandchildren that ye shook the hand of John L. Sullivan.'

"And before I could say, yes, no or aye, he took me by the hand and shook it, and oh, the grip that the great man had. Yes, Nora, darling, and this is the very hand that he shook me by." So saying Jeremiah Dolan would look almost with awe at his own toil-gnarled right hand.

From that day Jeremiah Dolan had become a constant subscriber to the *Police Gazette*. Through this medium he followed all prize fights and prize fighters. He lost rather more than he could afford when his idol was shattered at New Orleans. James J. Corbett he neither could tolerate nor forgive for his part in this tragedy. Fitzsimmons, he welcomed, but only because he had avenged the defeat of the mighty John L. Sullivan. James J. Jeffries he treated in a patronizing manner.

"A big man and a fair fighter," he used to say. "But you could not mention him in the same breath with the great John L."

Little Nora grew up under the scowling presence of John L. Sullivan in fighting pose until she became Miss Nora Dolan, the young lady who ran the news stand and cigar counter at the Hotel St. Regis. About this time there was considerable stagnation in the heavyweight division and lightweights were the heroes temporarily. Of these the greatest was "Bullet" Hansen, the champion.

As a follower of the prize fighters, Jeremiah Dolan began to feel an interest in the career of the Bullet. "For a little man," he said, "the Bullet is a great one. He can take all they give him till they tire themselves out. I shouldn't wonder that in his class he is nearly as good as John L. Sullivan was in his." This was a great concession.

Nora had one suitor of whom Jeremiah D. Dolan did not particularly approve. This was young Neil Donovan, whose people were near neighbors in Pearl Street, which is south of Market Street in San Francisco, and the brawn and considerable of the brains of that city used to be found there in that turbulent section.

"The lad is very well in his way," Jeremiah Dolan used to say. "But he has no shoulders and never did I see him in a bit of a set-to with the neighbors' children. Better, Nora, that you should take up with a lad with two fists. And him only in the writing business on a newspaper and a black Republican newspaper at that. There's only one writer worth the reading, the same being the great Irish poet, Tom Moore."

To these comments Nora would listen without reply. "A lad like Bullet Hansen, be he Swede or not, is the sort that I would be proud to have for a son-in-law."

"Why, he's stopping at the hotel now," volunteered Nora.

"Is he that, now!" said Jeremiah. "He's a grand-looking lad, is he not?"

"Oh, not much to look at," replied Nora. "His face looks as though it had been battered and one of his ears seems to be all crumpled up. And I think he looks a little stupid."

"That's the woman of it," observed Jeremiah. "Do you think that I could see him some night?"

"Easily enough," said the daughter. "He is always in the lobby near the news stand with a crowd of his friends.

"That's Neil now," said Nora as the doorbell rang. She left the room and reëntered with a slight young man with humorous eyes. He greeted Jeremiah cordially but the response was not particularly enthusiastic. The three sat down to the table under the picture of the great John L. Sullivan.

"And how's the paper business, Neil?" asked the old man, somewhat softened after his dinner.

"Just about so so," replied Neil. "I suppose that you've read all about Bullet Hansen being in town."

"I did that," replied Jeremiah. "And one of those papers ought to be ashamed of its making fun of its betters. Here," he said, going to the sideboard and picking up a newspaper, "listen to this:

> "The reception dinner to Bullet Hansen, the lightweight champion, would have been a complete social success if the hotel management had not served peas. The guest of honor could not keep them on his knife. If there had been nothing but peas on the table he might have starved to death in the presence of his admirers. Fortunately they served him with a chicken which he managed to bring to the mat with a toe hold and a headlock. He did more damage to the chicken than he did to Battling Keefe."

"Now, what kind of creature wrote that about the lightweight champion, do you suppose?" demanded Jeremiah Dolan.

"I did," replied the younger man calmly.

"Ye did!" said the old man angrily. " 'Tis like the likes of ye, funning about your betters."

"I don't know about any prize fighter being my better particularly," declared young Donovan, flaring. He was disregarding some gentle kicks under the table from Nora's small foot.

"Ye don't?" retorted the old man. "How about him?" He pointed upward at the picture of John L. Sullivan.

The devil was in the heart of Neil Donovan that night. Nora looked at him imploringly. "Well, he was beaten by a man with brains," he said.

For an instant Jeremiah Dolan was mute. Blasphemy had been spoken in his presence. Then the little old man rose, trembling but quiet. "Neil Donovan," he said, "I must ask ye to leave my house, and never do ye cross my threshold again."

"Father," pleaded Nora. "Neil didn't mean it."

Young Donovan rose quietly. "Good night," he said, and walked out of the place, while the old man glared after him with the wrath of a priest whose temple has been profaned.

That night Donovan found a pale and very cold Nora behind the cigar counter.

"Nora," he began, "you don't know how sorry I am——"

"It's too late now," she said. "You hurt my father's feelings out of pure devilment and I never can forgive you."

"Very well," he said in tones equally as chilly. Then his mood changed. "Oh, Nora," he pleaded. "Nora Dolan, it's only the hot-headed Irish of us all. Can't you forget——"

"I'm my father's daughter," said Nora Dolan. "Good-by to you, Mr. Donovan."

He turned abruptly to the elevator and went to his room in the Hotel St. Regis.

Thereafter Neil Donovan entered the Hotel St. Regis by way of the bar entrance. He studiously avoided the lobby where the cigar counter stood. Nora was wistful for one day. Then she tossed her head with the mental note, "He can't be much of a fighter or he would not be stopped that easily."

In the meantime she saw much of a fighter of a certain type, the very popular type. Bullet Hansen, the lightweight champion, held court in the lobby in the close vicinity of the cigar counter. He entertained his courtiers, gamblers, sports, managers and sporting editors by buying them vast quantities of cigars and cigarettes. Nora noted that the Bullet did not smoke himself. This abstinence was for professional reasons. She had read that "Bullet Hansen never used tobacco or alcohol in any form."

One night Bullet Hansen approached the cigar counter in tow of the head clerk. The Bullet held his cap crumpled convulsively in his right hand. He was blushing furiously and every wiry, sandy hair in his round head seemed to be standing erect.

"Miss Dolan," said the head clerk, "meet Bullet Hansen, lightweight champion of the world. He wants to meet you."

"Pleased to meet cha," mumbled the Bullet.

"How do you do?" said Nora, with the sweetly professional smile of the girl behind the cigar counter.

"I'll lick the 'Wisconsin Wild-cat' sure," continued the Bullet. "Well, good night, Miss Dolan. Got to meet a guy."

The Bullet attempted to raise his cap but found it in his upraised hand which confused him much more than three solid rights landed on his chin by the "Old Master." And the Old Master could hit harder than any lightweight that ever lived.

This was the beginning of the courtship of Bullet Hansen, lightweight champion. In a week it had reached the candy stage. Also Bullet Hansen had confided to Nora, "I hear the Wisconsin Wild-cat has a bum left hand." Later he confided, "I'm saving my dough. They won't have to give me any benefit. I don't see why the champ shouldn't save his dough. Do you?"

This open exhibition of softness on the part of Bullet Hansen, called by one announcer "the hardest nut in the business to crack," caused no little alarm to his manager, Billy Nallin. Mars and Venus are associated only in Greek mythology. A married fighter or a prize fighter in love is a terrible thing. Any fight manager will tell you that.

But there was nothing to be done. Billy Nallin was shrewd and he knew his man. It was the Bullet's stubbornness that kept him boring in, to use the technical term, when he was blinded by a rain of accurate blows, when any other human being would have been leg weary. It was the Bullet's stubbornness that brought him back into the fight to an ultimate victory after the Old Master had cracked three of his ribs with pistonlike body blows. This was the Bullet's plan of campaign, to take everything until the opponent, arm weary and baffled, laid himself open to a knock-out punch.

In a matter of this sort the Bullet would be more than ordinarily stubborn, if such a thing were possible. Therefore Billy Nallin said nothing, but attempted to make himself as affable as possible to Nora Dolan. In some matters no managers can manage their fighters. Nallin was not going to give any orders he could not enforce. His knowledge of ring matters had been acquired but his knowledge of psychology was instinctive and certain.

In time Bullet Hansen dined in the Dolan home under the picture of John L. Sullivan. By this time another picture stood beside it but just a little lower on the wall. On this picture was scrawled:

"To my pal, Jerry Dolan, from Bullet Hansen, lightweight champion of the world."

Eventually that whimsical city, the San Francisco that used to be, was interested and amused by the following figurative headline:

BULLET HANSEN WILL TAKE NEW SPARRING MATE.

Then followed an account of the romance of the St. Regis. There was much about the bridegroom to be, but little about the fiancée. She had knocked nobody out, as far as was known. Only one reporter speculated as to what her title might be and suggested, "The Lightweight Championess."

Neil Donovan appeared in the lobby of the St. Regis that night for the first time since the parting. He was a bit haggard and there was a cold glint in his eyes.

"Anyhow you will allow me to congratulate you, Miss Dolan," he said.

"You're mocking me as you mock everybody," said Nora. "Anyhow he is a fighter and he fights for what he wants." Her chin was high in the air and fighting blue-gray eyes looked defiantly into fighting blue-gray eyes.

"Oh, yes," returned Donovan. "The mitt is mightier than the typewriter. Well, goodby and good luck to you, Nora Dolan." He turned and disappeared in the direction of the bar.

To Jeremiah Dolan there came a thrill equal to that he felt the day the mighty John L. Sullivan shook him by the hand. It drew from him a confidence he never had betrayed before.

" 'Twas my dream since that day to be the father of a champion," he told Nora. "But that was not to be. Now I am to be the father-in-law of one. Do you see what they say in the papers? A championess. That's you, and a proud girl you should be over it, Nora Dolan. 'Tis a pity the boy is a Swede, but one can't have everything, and anyhow he's the champion."

But Nora Dolan did not share the paternal pride and enthusiasm. Her father was puzzled by the matter-of-fact manner in which she took the impending honors that were about to come to the house of Dolan.

" 'Tis not that you're thinking of that good-for-nothing Donovan lad, is it?" he demanded. "Him without the spirit to put up his fists to a Dutchman."

"No, no," replied the daughter. "I almost forgot all about him." But she did not make this statement with any particular conviction.

"They're a poor lot, the likes of the Donovans," continued the old man. "Writing for the papers and making fun of their betters. Now, there's a couple of men." He pointed upward to the portraits of the two champions. Nora looked at those two familiar scowls with apathy in her glance.

"Do you think that *he* would come to the wedding if he was invited?" mused Jeremiah Dolan. "He might, you know, if he knew that it was the daughter of the little man he shook hands with outside the Palace Hotel."

Nora shook her head absently and a little sadly. "There will be enough of them," she said. It sounded like the voicing of a presentiment and the presentiment came true.

Bullet Hansen had a full appreciation of his position in life. He was the champion and the wedding of a champion must be surrounded by what is known in sporting circles as class. "Yes, class," he insisted. "Plenty of class. There's just one thing, though. I got to invite my rubber, 'Deacon' Jones. He's colored, but he's the best rubber in the country, and just because I'm champion and you're the championess we don't want anybody to think we're stuck up. The Deacon's awfully proud about being my rubber and he's very sensitive. He's got to be asked."

To accommodate the guests at this important public ceremony, the Bullet and his manager, Billy Nallin, chartered the grand dining room of the St. Regis. The inmates of the sporting world of San Francisco began to clutter up the lobby and the bar—especially the bar—long before the hour set for what the boxing program might call the main event.

There was Eddie Geegan, the referee, called "The Honest Blacksmith." There was "One-round" Hogan, "Cockey" O'Brien, Captain Gleason of the detective force, with a professional interest in some of the guests, the La Montagne Sisters, refined acrobats from the Orpheum Theater, La Rue and Riley, song-and-dance team, the city coroner, a prominent fight fan, Mark Shaughnessey, manager of the leading middleweight, with Mrs. Mark Shaughnessey, and "Sandy" MacDonald, proprietor of the Bank Exchange saloon, accompanied by "Cocktail" Boothby, the most popular bartender in San Francisco. But why continue? The lights of the local sporting world were there.

And so they were married by a justice of the peace and sat at the head of the table while the wedding guests bathed in champagne. There were oceans of this, for it was the wedding of a champion. Jeremiah Dolan beamed from the foot of the table. There was only one regret for him. John L. Sullivan was not there.

The guests came singly and in groups to

pay their respects, as John L. himself might have put it.

Mr. Cocktail Boothby finally approached. "There's one thing I'd like to know, Bullet," he said. "I'd like to know just how you put over that half scissors hook. It always came too fast for me when you shot it in any of the fights."

Cocktail Boothby was a person of importance and Bullet Hansen was full of the vanity of a prize-ring champion.

"Sure, I'll show you," he said. "I'll show you all how Bullet Hansen manages the left half scissors hook. I'll show you with my new sparring partner, the championess. Stand up, Nora."

In a half daze the girl rose. "Now, put up your hands this way," he ordered illustrating.

"Now shoot your right at me this way."

She was watching his face. The little eyes seemed to take on a cruel gleam. The wiry hair seemed to stand erect. The lips seemed to curl in a snarl. The dumb and kindly expression that used to be in that face was gone.

"Go ahead, kid. Shoot it," he commanded.

She made a feeble motion toward him and suddenly felt a sharp tap on her side. "That's the way it's done," he announced. "That's Bullet Hansen's left half scissors hook to the liver. Nobody can take very many of those."

Nora collapsed into her chair. "I must go to the room for a few minutes," she said. "Only a few minutes. You must stay here and entertain the guests till I come back."

"Oh, sure," he said. "I won't run out on them till you get back."

The lobby of the St. Regis was deserted when Neil Donovan walked slowly out of the bar with his shoulders hunched dejectedly. He paused by one of the pillars and looked sorrowfully at the vacant cigar counter. A light hand touched his arm. He looked around and saw Nora Dolan, ghastly white and trembling.

"Neil," she whispered. "Neil Donovan. Help me. I must get away from here now."

"Are you married to him?" he demanded.

"Yes, yes," she said. "But I can't stand it. You must help me to get away from here."

"I can't. You're his wife now," he said dully.

"Is it true, then, that you are afraid?" she said. "He's a fighter and you are not, Neil Donovan."

Donovan became transformed. "Where do you want to go to, Nora Dolan?" he demanded.

"I've an aunt in Los Angeles," she said. "She would understand maybe. She's my mother's sister."

He half dragged her to one of the hacks waiting in front of the St. Regis. "Third and Townsend Depot, Finney," he ordered. "We've got to get there to make the Lark for Los Angeles."

She was huddled in a corner of the hack as he jumped in. "Now you must brace up, Nora Dolan," he said soothingly. "Don't think of anything but getting out of this now. I'll settle with your father. I'm not advising you, you know."

"But supposing that he should find out you helped me get away," she said. "I'm afraid for you, Neil Donovan."

His laugh in the half dark sounded quite carefree and light. "Nora Dolan," he said quietly, " 'twould be a joy to me to throw myself as wolf bait to stop the wolves from reaching you. But the wolves are toothless."

"I'm afraid," she persisted.

"I'm not," he said. "There's no need to be. To-night I do not fear the scowl of John L. Sullivan."

He whirled her out of the hack at the Southern Pacific Depot and dashed for the ticket office. She was still bewildered as he thrust a ticket into her hand, and a few gold pieces. The depot seemed to whirl and he pressed her through the gate. The mists cleared just for an instant and she saw that his eyes were laughing again.

"Good-by," she whispered. "And God bless you, Neil Donovan."

"Good-by, and the same to you, Nora Dolan," he said.

"All aboard!" shouted the gateman. She fluttered through and the gate slammed. There was a clanging of bells as the Lark pulled out of the station.

Donovan paused to light a cigarette. "Hullo," he heard. He looked up and saw Billy Nallin, the manager, with Bullet Hansen, both in dinner coats. The face of the battler was livid with rage. In the face of Nallin there seemed to be a look of relief.

"Hullo," returned Donovan with apparent complacence. "Looking for somebody?"

"I'm looking for my wife," said Bullet Hansen, and there was cold murder in his voice. "She made a get-away and somebody helped her do it. I can kill the man who did it."

"I did," said Neil Donovan quickly and quietly.

Then Neil Donovan looked into the fighting face of Bullet Hansen, but a fighting face more murderous than any of the lightweight champion's opponents ever had seen. He looked into it without flinching as the Bullet's fists clenched and he leaned forward.

Bullet Hansen did not strike. Instead he stamped his feet with impotent rage. "Hell!" he shouted hysterically. "I can't hit him. I want to fight somebody, to kill somebody!"

The fighter had lashed himself into such a pitch of fury that the slim figure of Donovan was no target for his wrath. He wanted to tear the pillars of the station apart, to throw himself into a wild mob, and there was nothing upon which to vent his rage but that slight figure, inadequate and insufficient.

Nallin laid a heavy hand on the battler's shoulder. "Come on then, Bullet," he said. "I got a wire from Hogan's manager. He's ready and got the date for Madison Square Garden."

"I'll kill him," said Hansen. "Get me them all. I'll kill them all."

"Come on then," pleaded Nallin. "Remember you're the champion."

He led him to a waiting hack and slammed the door on him. Darting back for an instant the manager said curiously to Donovan, "Are you a game guy or just crazy?"

Donovan laughed quietly. "I'll be damned if I know!" he replied.

The tale of the deserted champion long since had ceased to be a subject for merriment in San Francisco. Bullet Hansen had disposed of Hogan and a score of others. The bidding had been brisk for the bout between Bullet Hansen and the Wisconsin Wild-cat. A California promoter offered the biggest purse and the announcement had been made that Bullet Hansen would fight the Wild-cat for the lightweight championship of the world. The California boxing law permitted as many as forty-five rounds.

All this time Neil Donovan had received just one brief note from Nora Dolan, inclosing the money he had advanced her. She was living quietly with her aunt, she told him, and studying. He wrote her only briefly in reply, remembering that she was by law Mrs. Bullet Hansen.

The scene of the Hansen-Wild-cat fight was at Point Richmond, a little town on San Francisco Bay. All morning the ferryboats chugged across from San Francisco laden with followers of the art which inspired the famous set of rules laid down by the Marquis of Queensberry.

The dusk was gathering and the fog was rolling over Twin Peaks into Market Street when the extras came out announcing the passing of an old champion and the crowning of a new one.

"Extra! Extra! Bullet Hansen Beaten! The Wild-cat Wins Lightweight Championship. Extra! Extra! Part of Arena Collapses. Extra! Arena Catches Fire. Extra! Extra! Many People Hurt!"

Newsboys seem to exult in disasters. One cannot blame them. It is an impersonal sort of cruelty. Disasters mean business. "Extra! Extra! Bullet Hansen Beaten! Big Disaster at the Arena!"

Neil Donovan, assisted by Bobby Maher, one of the office boys from the *News*, half staggered into his room at the St. Regis. He looked pale and sick. His hands were swathed with heavy bandages and he moved them in a gingerly fashion.

"I always said they should keep women away from prize fights," complained Donovan. "Her dress caught fire after the section fell down. I didn't have sense enough to use my coat. I went and beat it out with my hands and now I can't use the typewriter. First get me a few drinks and about three packs of cigarettes. Then bring back one of the hotel stenographers and carry up her typewriter for her. I've got to do a lot of dictating."

Bobby dashed out. He returned carrying a typewriter and behind him came Nora Dolan.

"Neil Donovan!" she said. "Oh, you're hurt!"

"Nora Dolan," he returned. "I'm hurt no longer."

"Neil," she said, "you must take care of yourself. You ought to be in bed."

"I've work to do first," he said. "Are you the stenographer?"

"Yes," she replied seating herself at the typewriter. "I'm ready. Afterward I've lots to tell you and lots to thank you for."

He looked at her keenly. "You know the news?"

"I do," she replied. "The marriage was annulled. I'm ready."

Leaning back wearily in his chair Donovan began:

"Bullet Hansen lost the lightweight championship at Point Richmond yesterday to the Wisconsin Wild-cat. Referee Grogan stopped it in the forty-first round while Hansen was still on his feet, but blinded, bleeding and weak. As the referee pushed back the enfeebled champion Hansen gave vent to an inarticulate growl and still tried to bore in.

"His face was battered. The mouth was twisted, one eye was completely closed. The other eye was a narrow slit through which only the steely pupil gleamed a last defiance. The Wild-cat rained blow after blow into that battered face, but he could not make the champion draw back. To the last Bullet Hansen was pressing forward, boring in and lashing out feebly but persistently and——"

The typewriter ceased to click. Nora had risen with a quick catch of the breath and a deathly pallor in her face.

"Neil," she said. "I must go to him. I saw them bring him in. I owe him something. He needs me now."

Donovan looked at her sorrowfully. "Nora Dolan," he said. "If it must be, it must be. I would not stop you from what you think is right."

She left and walked unsteadily down the corridor. The room where Bullet Hansen was hiding lay at the end. The door was half open. He was alone. Ex-champions always are alone. He sat slumped in a chair with his head in his hands. At the sound of her footsteps he looked up with his battered face.

"So it's you?" he said dully. "Where did you come from?"

"I thought," she stammered, "you might need me now. It's different. You are the champion no longer and——"

"It's a lie!" he shouted furiously, and rose. "I tell you the referee robbed me. I wasn't knocked out. Nobody can knock me out. I'm champion still. I don't want you around me sniveling. I'm Bullet Hansen, lightweight champion of the world. Get that and get out."

Neil Donovan was sitting back in his chair limp and hopeless when she dashed back. She threw herself on her knees and buried her face on the arm of the chair.

"Oh, Neil Donovan," she said. "Thank God, he doesn't want me!"

"Oh, Nora Dolan," he replied. "Thank God he doesn't want you—but oh, how I do."

Young Bobby Maher was watching and listening with considerable bewilderment. The ringing of the telephone bell distracted him. He picked up the receiver. "Yes," he said, "wait a minute."

"Hey, Mr. Donovan," called the entirely literal Bobby Maher. "The city editor wants to know when in hell you will have that story done."

"Tell him in half an hour," replied Donovan briskly. "Nora Dolan, we've lots of work to do. Sit down at that machine. Let's see. Where was I? Oh, yes. Ready?

"And so passed Bullet Hansen, staring, staggering, but always pressing forward against the inevitable. Through that slit of an eye that was left to him his fighting soul blazed to the last—malevolent but splendid.

"New paragraph, Nora darling."

More stories by McGeehan in future issues.

ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT IT

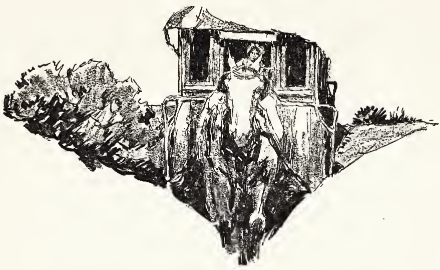
SAMUEL H. NORTHCROSS, famous among his business acquaintances as "the best cotton salesman in the South," went into a cigar store in a little North Carolina town one morning and asked for some good cigars. The best the tobacconist had was a brand retailing three for a quarter.

Northcross took three, lit one and stood a moment puffing it.

"How do you like it?" inquired the man.

"It's rotten," replied Northcross.

"Well," the dealer said, "I don't see that you've got any special kick coming. You've got only three of them, and I've got a thousand!"



The Hill Horse

By Calvin Johnston

Author of "In Siding," "School of Honesty," Etc.

A story of street railroading in the days when horse power still came from horses.

"THERE has been so much talk about horse sense," said the old switchman to the night yard crew, "that horse character has been overlooked entirely. And yet I have known a horse who upset the calculations of a railway magnate and promoted the organization himself, all by strength of character. No, I will not listen to argyments against a fact which should be self-evident to you, foreman. The circumstances," the old switchman continued, "as any old-timer of Climax City will tell you, are merely these:

Back in the days when horse power was still lodged in horses instead of motors, Climax was a brisk, growing town, with two horse-car lines running through the city, and a third, the McCracken Suburban, running to Milltown, about three miles from the Climax limits.

'Tis a singular thing about that town, that up to the time I speak of the citizens each went hurrying about his own business, and not one of them found time to engage in prominence. Divil a prominent citizen did they have, and, suddenly awakening to the need, imported one—a Mr. Fox, who had fostered a boom in a town across the State, with good results to all who did not invest in it.

So Mr. Fox, listening with sympathy to the needs of Climax, who offered ten thousand dollars if he would start a boom in our town, accepted, and became prominent at once.

"I do not need to investigate," he said in his speech of acceptance on the public square, "the cause of Climax bringing up the rear of the towns in this State. From where I stand I can see the cause creeping up Bell Tower Hill yonder," meaning, of course, the horse car. At the top of the hill old Baldy, the helper horse, with his traces thrown off, turned and went down again, as he had been doing a dozen years, little thinking that the knell of his job was sounding from Mr. Fox.

"The old nag is the most prominent citizen in Climax," said Fox, "furnishing the extra power necessary to land you at the top of the hill. 'Tis a shame to supplant him—I will not forget him—but Electricity is now to become prominent citizen, Electricity and me," he said. "We will take you up the hill and over. All the time not forgetting the thanks owed to the old hill horse for loyal service to Climax City," he added with an emotion which did him credit, particularly with Shannahan, superintendent of the car line.

And 'twas like the superintendent, who was every inch a Shannahan, to report the speech to Baldy in the car barn that same evening, while feeding him gumdrops out of a bag. "'Loyal service' was the word, and well deserved," said Shannahan, munching candy himself, as had come to be his habit instead of taking a drink when he felt low; "and though I myself might weather the changes that come with the electrifying of the line, I will not forget an old comrade."

Baldy opened wide his jaws, whether to smile or to swallow the gumdrops without dislocating them does not matter; because the message conveyed in the glance of his faded eyes was one of thanks and affection, and so answered the purpose as well as the loudest horse laugh would have done. And 'twas remarked afterward the indifference with which he plodded past the poles going up and wires being strung, as if confident that Shannahan would treat him on the level after the hill job was gone.

Y'understand that this Fox, being a man of action, had organized the two inside lines into one within a week after his speech which opened the boom; capital was raised to buy the electricity which at that time had just come on the market in quantity lots, and the end of the year saw the Climax Consolidated ready to turn on the current.

The McCracken Suburban Line, consisting of rails, equipment, and horses which the other lines had worn out, was of course not asked into the merger. "We do not want it at any price—as a gift," said Mr. Fox publicly, but privately he reflected, "Here is the chance for a killing, for Climax has no way of expanding except toward Milltown, and that lot of junk, with its charter, will be worth a hundred thousand before the boom busts."

Old McCracken, the builder, had died after sinking his all in operating expenses while hoping from year to year that Climax would boom and expand toward Milltown. And he left behind him a daughter, now in her thirties, who, being brought up to believe that the road would bring her fortune, kept it alive by means of desperate toil and economies. Sally McCracken was a small woman, with black hair turning gray, and bright, dark eyes. She lived alone at the homestead near the Climax end of the line, and here Fox came one afternoon, noting with pleasure the run-down house and barn. "Sure, the end cannot be far off for the management," he thought, "and the whole property shouting of mortgages and neglect."

Receiving no answer to the knock at the door, he followed the rusty switch around to the barn, where Miss Sally was nailing boards over the window of a little dilapidated car. "I am a stranger here," he explained, "with business at Milltown, and was told I could catch a street car across."

"Yes, indeed, mister," said Miss Sally. "I've just finished boarding up this window, so you'll be safe from draft. Walk right aboard, and make yourself comfortable." And in a minute she had a sorry-looking horse, who had put his head out of the barn to stare at a passenger, hooked up. Then, on the driver's stool herself, she clucked, "Giddap, Jerry," and they were off with a tremendous hubbub and jolting. "Seems like we ought to be going awful fast with so much fuss," she said, but her passenger could not hear her until she stopped the car.

"I'd better stop the talking and tend to business," she said. "It's sometimes hard to get going, Jerry's that hesitating."

"There is no hurry," said Mr. Fox, returning with interest the stare which Jerry turned back over his shoulder. "I do not wonder the nag is reproachful," he said. "If you do not mind my doing so, I will agree with him that I am much better conditioned to pull the car with himself inside as a passenger. And has the street-car business fallen on evil days, that he should be your only motive power?"

Miss Sally nodded, putting on a sunbonnet which she took from a nail on the front of the car. "Business has never been what you might call good on this line," she said, "though there is a carload on the morning and evening runs. Of course, Jerry is getting along in years, and thinks he ought to be pensioned, but I let him operate on his own schedule, and the only difference it can make to the passengers is that they must start a little earlier and arrive a little later. This is better than not riding at all, for since you are so thoughtful as to ask, sir, I will admit that once Jerry's legs give out the passengers will have to stretch their own. That house already has a plaster on it fit to break in the roof, and I couldn't raise money to buy another horse. Still, here's hoping," she said, with a flash of bright eyes from the sunbonnet. "It shan't be said that the last of the McCrackens quit on the job that the family mortgaged 'emselves for. Turn around now, Jerry; and giddap."

"Sure, it takes travel to enlighten and expand the mind," thought Mr. Fox, as the flat-wheeled little car, rolling stock only by courtesy, slid and bumped along. "Now, the woman has given me a grand idea, which I can put across with brass bands and pageantry, if the dommed vehicle only will not shake the brains out of me before Milltown."

A large man, dressed to the top of fashion, with large diamond and bright tie, Mr. Fox gave distinction to even that dingy interior. Braced in a corner, with one eye closed in reflection, he kept the other, as green and crafty as a cat's, on the country round about, which was high and level, as if created to order for building lots. Arriving at Milltown, he said he would return in an hour if the schedule permitted.

"The coach will wait," said Sally, as a coachman might, smiling and touching her sunbonnet; but she followed him with a keen glance. "He is too prosperous a man to be riding on the Suburban merely to arrive somewhere," she thought. "Likely he is an investor come in for the new boom, and is looking for a hole to plant his money." Now divil a hole yawned so hungrily for money as the Suburban, and Sally, always hoping to find a backer or partner till the boom came her away, planned her sales talk till he got back.

" 'Tis easy to hear Opportunity knocking at the door of Milltown," she said. "Only capital is needed to invite him in and give him the blow-out of his life."

But the gentleman sadly shook his head. "I am Mr. Fox, who consolidated the Climax car lines," he said. "In pushing the prospects of the town I supposed a suburb could be developed out this way. Now I find the country too rough, and Milltown a blot on the horizon. 'Tis not a pleasant duty," he said, "but I owe to my conscience to say that if you are running the car in hope of a building boom out this way, your disappointment will be terrible, your ruin complete." He sighed at her with a sympathy which did him credit.

"Faith, your word ought to be final—'tis you should know," said Sally, "and there's no denying I'm tremendously disappointed, Mr. Fox. But as long as there's one horse power left in the old thing, I'll keep it alive. Under the wire, Jerry," she said, and drove back, sitting her stool as straight as a coachman.

Mr. Fox, back at his office, reflected: "A ride on the McCracken Suburban is a terrible price to pay for ideas," but he felt he had the worth of his bruises in the one suggested by Sally. After browbeating the citizens, and discharging so many of the street-railway employees, it was policy to show that only the stern necessity of progress compelled him. "At heart," Mr. Fox told himself with a grin, "I am a creature of sentiment. Sure, I will pension the old hill horse; 'twill be myself as prominent citizen putting Climax over the hill which he dragged them up—myself who will recognize his services with a parade and brass band. And at the end of the march I will present him with his pension—daily rations of straw and oats, and the lease of a pasture where he can spend the last ten years of his old age in clover. Dom!" said Mr. Fox, interrupting himself. "It may be necessary to poison the skate of the McCracken Suburban if he is considering living ten years, and he looks no older than the hill horse. I must look up a horse doctor," he said, "and discuss how long it is good for a patient to live."

Now, as easily proven by the story of what has gone on since Mr. Fox arrived in Climax, he is a man of action, and hardly has the idea finished in his mind, until Baldy's parade is ready to start. Next day the cars are carried over Bell Tower Hill by dynamo, and the center of the celebration is the horse grown old in the service of Climax. He is led up to the grand marshal by Shannahan, who formally introduces him:

"The retiring Prominent Citizen!"

And with a glistening eye which does him credit, Fox pats the head which, beribboned and furbelowed, has turned to Shannahan questioningly. The grand eulogy is delivered, the pension awarded. All Baldy had to do was live on it!

There is nothing disgruntles a pensioner so much, y'mind, as being cooped up in quarters where, idling sweetly himself, he cannot watch other people sweating about their business. Doubtless Mr. Fox had this important fact in mind, when selecting the pension pasture of Baldy high up on a hillside where he could stand in the sun, stuffed out with his rations, and look for miles on the activities of the country. From the first day he was an interested observer, stumbling only now and then among the boulders with which the pasture abounded, to nibble at a nettle or weed. During daylight he watched and at night retired reluctantly to a battered shed in the corner, where a shanty farmer living over the hill served his ration of oats in a box. Every day Baldy's interest increased in the prospect, but as he always gazed in one direction 'twas evident that one of the forms of activity he witnessed fascinated him far more than all the rest. 'Twas a horse and car, diminished in size both by distance and a fading eyesight, which sometimes crawled along a thread of steel in the level country below. 'Tis not for me, though experienced in the matter of horse power on rails, to delve into the personal reflections of the animals themselves; but there is little doubt that the impatient snort of the puzzled veteran of transportation, and his impatient pawing among the rocks, was intended as a reflection on the service and irregular schedule of the McCracken Suburban. 'Twas not long, however, till these signs of irritation ceased, and were succeeded by an anxiety that kept him with breast pressed against the rail fence, and eyes straining; for day by day the service was growing more irregular and the speed decreasing, till it was a guess at departing whether the car would ever arrive at all.

Now, divil a pensioner of pride can look on unmoved at the cause or business which pensions him while it goes to pieces. There is no doubt tears came to the faded eyes, when, reflecting on the rotten condition of the Suburban, Baldy would retire to his shed in the evening, and nose about for an oat which might have been overlooked.

Oat there was none by this time, however, and nobody to blame. For Mr. Fox, after providing three weeks' provender for Baldy, with an emotion which did him credit with the whole population of Climax, had unfortunately trusted to his memory to keep it coming. Now anybody, knowing a promoter's brain, will agree offhand that plans for making money will crowd every other thought to the limit, so 'tis not the fault of Mr. Fox at all that when three weeks were up he could not have admitted a thought of his pensioner; with a perfectly open mind, there was no room for it anywhere at all.

However, Baldy had his pasture where nettles were plentiful, and these he cropped, along of cockleburs which were in no condition to scratch his tongue, the burrs themselves having long been collected in his mane and tail. And be it explained as an example to human pensioners who have been known to forget their benefactors when retired with honor among rocks and nettles, that Baldy's character soared above animal discomforts; when his soul was bounded only by a hide shrunken over his ribs so that, hunched at the fence, he looked like a Piute wigwam, still he was ready to maintain the tradition of the horse—more power to him. One day he leaned against the fence, and it broke down; Baldy with resolution picked himself up and, learning what had happened, began climbing down the hill. 'Twas a day when character and courage were demanded—the McCracken Suburban had suspended operation entirely.

At the very foot of that hill sat a woman, her chin in her hand and sunbonnet pulled down over her eyes. "I suppose death is not to be blamed for taking Jerry," Sally McCracken was thinking. "Everybody to his business. I wonder what mine is," she said, "for when death came after poor Jerry he put the kibosh on the McCracken Suburban." Pulling her sunbonnet farther over her face so she could not see the homestead or battered little car, she admitted that nothing was to be done now but let them go on the offer of Fox, who had come out again the week before.

"May the fiend fly away with me, if ye will excuse the language," he had said with an emotion that did him credit with Miss McCracken; "but as a street-railway magnate myself I could not sit quiet in my conscience with yourself in mind, fighting the fight of railway promotion in your sunbonnet on a driver's stool, and urging on Jerry, who is no fool to be thinking he should be resting quietly in a graveyard, instead of dragging a flat-wheeled bedlam around on earth."

Miss McCracken thanked him for his sympathy for the Suburban.

" 'Tis this way," said Mr. Fox. "I am a man of sentiment, and having made money out of the street railway here in Climax, 'tis natural for me to interest myself in a pioneer of the business who has been less lucky. The line could probably be made to pay in ten years," he said, "but I take it you are not prepared to finance it so long. Of course, my fellow directors would not consider a proposition to absorb it, but personally I will take over the right of way and pay the taxes, carrying yourself on the roll as a pensioner, not of myself, d'ye mind, but of the McCracken Suburban, for seventy-five a month." 'Twas not philanthropy at all, he explained, as ten years later he expected to get his money back with interest. "I believe in live and let live," he said, "and would feel happier if I knew the pioneer of Climax City railways was enjoying some of the prosperity of the rest of us. As your affairs stand now, you are about to lose out entirely."

"You would lose the franchise if the line was not operated," said Miss McCracken, but he snapped his fingers.

"I would not give a dollar for the present franchise," he smiled. "I will hold the right of way, and if the town expands or Milltown grows up, apply for another franchise and be ready to lay rails on a grade already made. And I would be saved hold-ups by property owners or condemnation suits."

'Twas a twisted and yet a straight proposition, which the more Miss McCracken tugged at the more she tangled. "But if you want it, why not pay a lump sum?" she asked.

"I do not want it for ten years," he explained.

"Surely 'twas a generous offer," said Sally, "to guarantee my living expenses on security that may be worth little to you. I did not mean to doubt you."

Mr. Fox, having had experience with doubters in the habit of proving their suspicions, was not offended.

"But the old Surburban is a religion with me, and though 'tis pass the hat and short service," said Sally, "do not blame me for believing in it as long as it lasts. I am afraid it will not be long, for Jerry is in delicate health, and I won't push him till he drops."

Now the evidence in the case was never brought out by post-mortem, and I am not one to accuse Mr. Fox of giving Jerry a handful of arsenic and sugar after sending Miss Sally into the house for a glass of water. But the fact is that Jerry, who had been ailing, gave up the ghost that night, so the truth will never be known until the poisoned ghosts report at the last day, which has nothing to do with the matter in hand; and this matter is, that Sally sat on the hillside, with her bonnet pulled over her face, the day after the old nag's funeral, and held a post-mortem on the Suburban itself.

"Poor old railway," she said. "After living along of you, 'tis hardly decent to trade in your remains to a stranger, for a pension. But I can keep the interest paid on the homestead mortgage, and run a market garden. Good luck to Mr. Fox—may he lay his magic touch on the old line some day and resurrect it—a shining—system——" But in spite of the spirit which did not often fail her, Sally choked up, and bowed her face on her knees, dead beat. "Poor old McCrackens, too," she said.

And there was a plod-plod of heavy footsteps which stopped beside her, and the last poor McCracken looked up into the faded eyes of one who had been Fox's pensioner before her, and in consequence that much worse off. He was bony and grizzled, and wore a blanket of cockleburs, but he looked at her sternly as a veteran of veterans, recalling a trembling rookie back into a fight for a lost cause.

Presently Sally began rocking to and fro, laughing to herself. "A horse," she said at last; "a horse from the skies." She rose and held out her hand, as if tempting him with salt or sugar, and Baldy nuzzled it.

"He looks old and half starved," she said, "but big and strong." She started to examine his teeth, then drew back. "It ain't Sally McCracken, Lord, who'll look your gift horse in the mouth, though he's a hundred years old."

But after considering a minute she slumped back into her former position. "Go way," she said; "the Lord didn't send you, and you know it. I never stole a horse yet, and won't be tempted." Baldy pawed with one hoof, and again she looked up. "Well, well, thank you, mister, for coming to visit me on this lonesome day," she told him. "I can set out a good feed for you, anyway." She walked around the foot of the hill, with her head down and hands stuck in her apron pockets, and led the way to the barn. But there she missed her follower, and went searching around the corner of the house. Baldy had stopped at the dilapidated car, sizing it up. And as Sally looked on, with her hands clasping at her breast, the old hill horse stepped lightly all fours between the rusty rails and backed against the dashboard.

After a while a very solemn woman brought out a sunbonnet full of oats, and an armful of hay. "Mister," she said, talking to him as he munched; "this business seems to have been settled beyond my say-so; if you're an act of Providence it is not for me to interfere. I'll leave you free to go any time you please; if your owner comes hunting you, he can have you, though he's not been feeding you. But, mister, I believe if I can hang on a little longer, the boom will reach me; and if you see me through we will always share and share alike. To the last day of your life I'll pension you!"

At this dreadful promise Baldy gave a stagger, as she remembered afterward; but from that time on never flinched at anything.

'Twas not long till his ribs began to disappear and his strength came back. 'Twas miraculous to Sally that he remembered the hours for starting, sometimes being at the car when she came out in the morning to drive one of the two loads of the day to Milltown. Baldy made his own schedule, too. "Surely he can tell the time to the minute," she thought with awe, "and knows more about railroading than the McCrackens ever did." And though she could not suspect it, Baldy was happier than he had ever been in his life; for his experience in Climax had been that street cars only ran uphill, and here on the level tracks of the Suburban 'twas like railroading in Paradise.

What was the rage of the plotting Fox when he learned that the Suburban was operating still. "She has raised money enough to buy another skate," he reflected, and shook his fists, for he had in fact purchased over a hundred acres along the right of way, and not only strangers, but citizens, were seeking investments in the town, which was booming beyond all expectation. So it was that the thoroughbred financier, in his race for riches, was being beaten by selling platers driven by Sally McCracken in a sunbonnet. "They are racing me in relays," thought Fox with indignation.

But whether he lacked for face—which cannot always show itself when featuring a guilty conscience—or whether he thought the crisis demanded rougher stuff, he discarded the policy of calling on Miss McCracken with knock-out sugar for the motive power. "Jesse James was right," he reflected, and adopted the policy of wrecking the Suburban in a physical sense, y'understand.

Autumn had gone by this time, but the hardy crew of the Suburban kept their schedule, defiant of wind or snow. The new shoes of Baldy which Miss Sally had nailed on herself, rang like silver bells on the frozen path, his coat had thickened, and he looked fifty years younger than when he was a pensioner. The last of the McCrackens herself sparkled with youth and hope, as if certain that Providence would refuse her nothing after sending a horse from the skies.

Then the wreckers came down on them.

But such was the skill of the wreckers that for a time the loosened rails, and bolts shaking out of the car, seemed only the general debility of the Suburban; the few passengers peered and began to talk of a bus line, and 'twas indeed a more heartbreaking, back-breaking labor for Sally to fight the supposed natural causes of grief than the known work of mischief makers. The weather grew worse, and it seemed as if Providence had changed sides. Still she kept going. One evening after they drove into the yard Sally stood talking to Baldy. "I must not blame Providence," she said, "who gave me dispensation; nor hard luck; nor our own selves. 'Tis simply that the old Suburban has fallen into a galloping decay. Cave-ins, loose ties and rails, and to-day the last window glass went out of the car when the wheel came off. Faith, one passenger said that riding in the dark, cold, clattering old box is like being a pauper on his funeral journey. That broke my heart. To-morrow, mister, we throw up the sponge and will sign away our rights for the pension, if the offer of Mr. Fox still holds."

That night she was awakened by Baldy kicking in the barn, which was so unusual that she went out with a lantern, and found him walking uneasily about the lot. Still she did not suspect mischief makers. It was snowing, so she persuaded him to return to his stall, and there was no more disturbance.

On the first trip at daylight she came to a section of track which had slid and upended in the ditch; there were no tracks, or evidence of wreckers, the whole job being drifted with snow, but Sally knew the track could not have slipped of itself. "Why should anybody treat us so?" she asked Baldy. "Well, we had come to the end anyway." In the cold, dawning light she stood there in her weather-stained overcoat and cap, wiping away a tear with her chapped knuckles.

So a man tramping along the track out of Climax came on her; a burly man with hands in his pockets and a fugitive air. He looked with a bleared blue eye at the slide, and then at Sally. "I guess you'll have to foot it, ma'am, like I'm doing," he said, and passed her.

She turned to call him back and tell him that she was the manager, and would haul him and any more passengers who walked as far as the slide, on to Milltown. But the queer behavior of the man struck her dumb. He had stopped face to face with the horse, slowly raising his hands, and at a nicker of recognition said: "Old Baldy, by all the saints!"

In a moment he wheeled, demanding how his old friend got here, who should be living with all the luxuries.

"Is he yours? Then you were a cruel master," said Sally, "leaving him unsheltered and starved and matted with burrs."

"But he is the old hill horse who was pensioned by Mr. Fox," said Shannahan.

"Saints above!" said Sally; "and I was about to let him pension me!"

That it was a narrow escape she was convinced, after they had talked. "Once your road was closed down and your franchise forfeited," said Shannahan, "how could you expect a pension from what did not exist? I see," he said, "that you are easily taken in by a smooth talker. And there is no doubt that Fox poisoned your first horse, and hired scoundrels to divil you to death by half wrecking the road. It is a straight talk, and not inspired by personal dislike," said Shannahan, "though I could not get along with Fox, and resigned as superintendent."

"And what are you doing now?"

"I have taken to drink. I used to do it when in hard luck," explained Shannahan, "till—and it may seem strange to you, Miss McCracken—till the comradeship sprung up with old Baldy. Such character he has, and seemed interested in me, and when business broke wrong and I was tempted, I would visit in the barn and eat gumdrops along with him."

"I am sorry you have fallen into bad company in the absence of Baldy," said Sally.

"I will come to see him often," said Shannahan, and blamed himself bitterly for neglecting him so long in Fox's pasture. "I am on my way now to take a foreman's job promised me by the manufacturer at Milltown," he explained.

He spoke firmly enough, but there was a queer lost expression in his face, and when they arrived at Milltown he stood talking to the horse. "Well, if you are bothered again," he said to Sally, "I will take a hand and carry the war to Fox himself. Saints bless you, miss, for taking the care you have of my comrade here." He said that he would ride back with her that evening and repair the track.

"I may not drive in myself this evening, but will send Baldy," said Sally. "You can drive back and get the tools from me, if you will be so kind."

At six o'clock Shannahan found horse and car waiting, and drove with several passengers as far as the slide; then he returned the short distance to the McCracken house.

There was no answer to his knock, and understanding a message on the large square of paper tacked to the door, struck a match. "Walk on in and light the lamp in the sitting room," he read, and obeyed.

A large envelope addressed to himself lay on the table under the lamp. It contained a legal transfer of the McCracken Suburban to himself, and a brief letter, saying that Miss McCracken had taken a position in town. It ran:

> It will be home for you and Baldy, and by driving the car to and from work you can hold the franchise. Some day you can sell it and make me a present of half—give me anything but a pension. If you don't take hold, I lose out anyhow.
>
> P. S. I dropped in to tell Mr. Fox the news. He was profane to learn that his pensioner Baldy had assisted me. I invited him to continue hostilities, with you in charge. He did not enthuse.

That was all the letter; but a large box was also addressed in large, significant letters: "Superintendent Shannahan."

"Glory be, it is gumdrops!" he said, and went out to share with Baldy.

Shannahan, a practical street-railway man, began working on the manufacturer at Milltown next day. "The development will never head this way without regular transportation. Now is the time to grab off your share in the Climax boom," were his arguments. The time was favorable for them, and several months later the old McCracken Suburban was reorganized and electrified. Shannahan remained as superintendent, he and his partner making a good thing in money and stock.

"Now you will be returning to the homestead," Shannahan told her; "and a cruel deed it is, too."

"Well, it is mine, and I can be cruel as anybody at a pinch," said Miss McCracken. "I have called it home longer than you, who will find a hotel much more to your liking."

"But what about old Baldy?" asked Shannahan.

"Would you entertain a horse at a hotel?" asked Sally.

"It is cruel to separate him from me. Little ye know," said Shannahan, "of the despair he will be in. Ye're going to turn me down, Sally? Often I remember the first time we met, and Baldy looking on. We will both be missing the gumdrops, too."

"Both?" said Sally with a start. "You can eat them without a horse for company."

" 'Twould not be sociable," said Shannahan firmly, seeing he had scored. "And here, too, I have brought a ring."

"Let's see it," said Sally, her brown eyes thoughtful. She shook her head. "Here, take it back," she said, but he had to take the whole hand also, as she had put it on her finger.

Another story by Mr. Johnston in the next issue.

WHAT THE NORTHWEST MOUNTED DOES

THE annual report for 1923 of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, more often called the Northwest Mounted Police, recently was made public. It would take a complete issue of THE POPULAR to tell in any detail of the year's work of this truly remarkable organization, but here are a few scattered facts of interest:

The force consists of 58 commissioned officers and 1,090 noncommissioned officers and constables—a total force of 1,148 men with which to enforce British law in a wild area of almost a million and one half square miles.

During the year 16,463 cases were investigated, and 2,863 convictions for crimes and misdemeanors secured. In addition to this the force handled almost four thousand naturalization inquiries and assisted twenty Canadian government departments in the performance of their duties. In all they helped enforce thirty-five laws.

The real work of the Mounted is the enforcement of law and order in the bleak Northwest. There they are "The Law." They act as magistrates, coroners, marriage-license clerks, customs officers, immigration officers, land agents, game wardens and in a dozen or so other capacities.

Taking justice into the far places of the wilderness is one of their big jobs. To conduct a murder trial, one party left Quebec for Ponds Inlet on July 7th and didn't get back until October 4th.

Whatever happens is all in the day's work for the Mounted. One party spent a year at Craig Harbor. The sun disappeared late in October and did not shine again until the middle of February—a period of 109 days. In a period of 304 days the wind blew strongly for 221 days, often with full gale strength. The temperature got down to 51 degrees below zero. In spite of these conditions the men of the party remained cheerful and their discipline was excellent. Patrols were made on foot for a distance of 75 miles from their headquarters.

Quite justly, the Mounted Police officers are held in high regard in Canada. Their object is to administer justice rather than to obtain a high percentage of convictions. At a trial last year the counsel for the defense did not cross-examine a Mounted policeman who had given evidence against his client, agreeing with the judge who was trying the case that cross-examination of the officer was unnecessary because the policemen have the reputation of giving their evidence in "the most loyal and upright manner."

Capricious Patricia

By Jack O'Donnell

Professor Doane was a newcomer in the horse-racing world but he knew a thing or two that the old-timers didn't suspect.

THE longer I stick around race tracks the more I'm convinced that a guy tryin' to make a livin' followin' the bangtails oughta have at least a smatterin' of knowledge about everything under the sun includin' this stuff they call psychology. For, after all, hosses ain't much different from the rest of us. They have likes and dislikes, bad days and good days, and they get sulky and playful just like children. And if you know how to get the best outta children accordin' to Hoyle, or whoever is the author of psychology, you stand a pretty fair chance of gettin' the best outta a hoss, 'specially if that hoss is one which had oughta win but which don't.

All of which brings us around to old "Doc" Doane and his hoss Patricia. Doane knows as much about hosses as he knows about books and maxims and all that sorta stuff and that's sayin' a whole platterful. Back in 1915, when he first comes to the bush circuit, from the Lord knows where, he caused a sensation. That was down at the Tall Oaks track. The gang woke up one spring mornin' to find something new under the sun. This new thing was a tall, gaunt old man, with snowy white locks, which curl up over the satin collar of a go-to-church coat, a long kind face with nose specks in front of a pair of pale-blue eyes, carryin' a soap box full of books from a delivery wagon to a stable tack room.

We could see the way he went in and outta the stable that he had a hossman's right to be there, but he looked as outta place as a dislocated shoulder. But there was something about the old man—dignity, I guess you'd call it—which didn't encourage familiarity. We pretended we didn't notice nothin' strange in his bein' there, but every one of us from "Umbrella Herb," the tout, to "Piker Pete" Silverman, the bookmaker, was rapidly gettin' headaches from curiosity.

But we wasn't kept long in the dark. After he'd put away his books and tidied up his tack room the old man saunters out to the bench where five or six of us is sunnin' ourselves and says: "Gentlemen"—yes, he says gentlemen just like he doesn't know we ain't—"gentlemen, can you direct me to the official handicapper's office? I'm a newcomer at this track and it is my desire to get acquainted with the officials!"

"Hossman?" blurts out Umbrella Herb, and the question is saturated with doubt.

"Yes, I'm a horse owner," the old man

confesses. "I am Cornwallis Doane, owner of a very small stable."

"Welcome to our playground, old-timer," pipes up Piker Pete. "We been needin' some new blood on this circuit. Aim to stay long?"

"For quite some time, thank you," says the newcomer in a sorta quiet soft voice, givin' Piker Pete a smile that was as gentle as a pickpocket's touch.

"Sportin' owner?" says "Handsome Harry" Kearns, the crookedest hoss owner that ever slipped a hoss a powder.

"Sporting owner? I don't quite follow you," comes back the friendly old man.

"I mean do you bet on the races?" explains Harry.

"Oh, I understand," says Doane, smilin' apologeticlike at Harry for his ignorance of race-track talk. "Occasionally I feel speculatively inclined, and when I do I wager modest sums—but only on my own horses."

I see Piker Pete and Handsome Harry exchange looks at this information, but the old man is lookin' out the window, as the sayin' is, and he misses the play. But that passin' of looks tells me a bookful. I see that these two bandits ain't gonna give nobody else a chance to get to the old gent first—that they're gonna start from scratch to grab Doane's bank roll before anybody else knows he's among those present.

Now, I ain't no copper and I never pretended to be no saint, but I kinda like this kind-faced old man and I make up my mind that Handsome Harry and Piker Pete's gotta take me as well as the old gent before they's any bank rolls changin' ownership. I don't say nothin' then, but I direct the old boy to the handicapper's office and stick around to hear the post-mortem of this queer meetin'.

Well, first there's the laugh. I don't grudge 'em that, 'cause after all the old man does look like something you see on the stage, and he's awful innocent, but when Piker Pete says to Harry: "The charity thing to do is to send him to the poorhouse before he gets into bad company"—well, when I hear that I'm glad I'm a honest hustler instead of a crooked hoss owner or a sure-thing bookmaker. I at least have the satisfaction of knowin' that when I get a sucker to put a bet down on a hoss, agreein' to cut me in on the winnin's, of course, I ***know*** something—I know that the owner of that hoss is tryin' to win with him. Maybe if I was more like Harry and Pete I'd eat more regular, but maybe I wouldn't sleep so well.

Anyway, after that crack about sendin' the old man to the poorhouse the gang begins speculatin' on where he come from and who he is. Nobody there has ever seen him before and nobody by the name of Cornwallis Doane is in the dope books we have with us. Umbrella Herb says that maybe he's from the East.

When Pete and Harry mosey off to cook up a scheme against the old gent I amble along up to the handicapper's office and hang around outside waitin' for Doane to come out. While I'm waitin' I see a bill posted on the side of the building which says that Kearns is offerin' for sale two hosses—Patricia, a six-year-old mare, and Mike, her three-year-old half brother. I'm gettin' a laugh outta Kearns tryin' to unload Patricia when Doane comes up behind me. He stands a few feet away and reads the bill over my shoulder.

"Are you familiar with the records of those two horses, son?" he says to me.

"Know 'em, you mean?" says I, turnin' round facin' him. "I know every hair on both of their hides. Mike is a likely gelding by Tripod, outta Princess Pat. He's a sprinter pure and simple. Couldn't go more'n six furlongs unless he was on a train. Patricia, his half sister, is by Paddy Dear outta Princess Pat. There ain't nothin' about her breedin' which won't pass the censors. As a two and three year old she did everything a hoss could do to make her ancestors proud, but after her half brother, Mike, was foaled she never earned enough money to make the first payment on a currycomb. Kearns bought the pair for a song from an old fellow who was dead up against it and who had to raise a few hundred to take his daughter to Arizona—consumption, or something. Now, I guess, he's gettin' tired payin' Patricia's feed bills and figures the only way he can get rid of her is to make the buyer of Mike take her in the bargain. Slicker, that Kearns!"

"Um!" says the old man. "I need a good horse about Patricia's age. I believe I'll look in at the sale this afternoon!"

"Say, listen, old-timer!" I blurts out, forgettin' his dignity and everything in my excitement, "you don't mean you'd buy that hayburner, do you?"

"Patricia is a thoroughbred race horse, isn't she?" He always says "isn't" instead of ain't and I always let it pass.

"She was *once!*" I tell you. "Now she's just a hoss!"

"I have great respect for breeding, son, and I'm a firm believer in the old saying 'blood will tell' whether applied to men or race horses," he tells me. "So, even though I appreciate your good intentions I think I shall look in at the sale this afternoon."

Somehow I ain't got the heart to let this old man get hooked by Kearns without makin' one more try at tippin' him off to what he's up against, so I says: "Keep your eyes peeled when dealin' with Kearns," I says. "He's as crafty as a pawnbroker."

"Thanks, son," he smiles, "but did you ever hear the old Latin maxim, 'No man has a monopoly of craft to himself?' "

I have to admit he's over my head, so he just smiles and pats me on the shoulder like he's my dad or something. But I kinda like it just the same. And I kinda like bein' called son, too, even though I'm pretty close to twenty-five and have been kickin' around race tracks goin' on ten years.

"May I inquire what is your name, son?" he says as we start walkin' toward the stables.

"There ain't no secret about that," I tell him. "My name's Roy Wheaton, but everybody around the race track calls me the 'Feed-box Kid,' or just plain 'Kid.' "

He smiles a little at that open-faced confession and says: "If you don't mind I'll just call you 'son.' You have a good face and an engaging manner, and I feel certain you are quite distressed to find an old man like me mixing up with publicans and sinners, as the Good Book says. But there is an old German saying to the effect that 'A clean mouth and an honest hand will take a man through any land.' So, I try to keep my speech clean, son, and I'm honest after my fashion. By that I mean I enter into no crooked deals with horse owners, bookmakers or anybody connected with racing. I love race horses—sort of a weakness, I presume—and I love the sport of racing. But I am not averse to making a little bet on my own horses when I feel they have a sporting chance to win."

I was dyin' to ask him who he was and where he come from but somehow he ain't the kinda man a fellow asks them kinda questions of. While I'm thinkin' about it he gets the jump on me, askin': "If it's a fair question, son, what is your business around the tracks?"

"Pickin' winners," I tell him. "Pickin' winners and sellin' inside information to fellows who can't pick 'em and who can't get the inside info. I'm what they call a hustler. I play a lone hand, matchin' my wits against owners and bookmakers. I get info from many sources—waiters, bartenders, clockers, sportin' writers and stableboys—and then I go find me a sucker who is itchin' to bet. One horse to a race—that's my motto. Some days it's one hoss to the day. I don't ask nobody to bet on a race unless I know something. None of this guess-and-God-be-with-me stuff. I gotta know something or I don't work. Understand?"

He smiles like he knows and says: "Sort of a free lance of the turf, eh, son?"

I admit that's about what it amounts to and we walk along toward his stable. I'm anxious to see what sorta hosses he's got in his stable and figure maybe he'll let me have a slant at them.

As we enter his tack room I get a new picture of this strange old bird. As a general rule tack rooms are all messed up with bridles, saddles, blankets, stools, pails and other junk. But this one is different. It's as orderly and clean as a Dutch wife's kitchen, and instead of the usual pictures of prize fighters, chorus gals and race hosses there are four or five framed pictures of oceans and fields, and one of a swell-lookin' dame about twenty-one, and a lotta books neatly stacked up on a shelf which has clean paper on it. There's something about the place that makes me feel I oughta take off my cap, but I don't. He doffs his hat though and puts on one of those funny-lookin' little black-silk things—skullcaps, I guess you call 'em—and tells me to make myself to home. He says he ain't much of a guy to make friends, but that he's always been more or less associated with young fellers and that when he does make a friend on the race track it's generally with some chap about my age.

He fusses around a little straightenin' up here and there and makin' the place even more comfortable; then he tells me to wait, that he'll be back in a minute. With that he unlocks the door leadin' to the box stalls, goes in and closes the door after him. That gave me a laugh 'cause nobody on the bush circuit ever took such pains to keep a guy from seein' his hosses, but I figure he's a little queer so I don't say nothin'. I just sit there and look at the picture of the pretty girl who I learn later is his daughter. Then I look over the books. They've gotta lotta names I don't even understand. None of them are story books so I takes a peek at some more that are in a box settin' beside the cot. There ain't none that appeals to me, but I see a newspaper stickin' up between two of 'em, and pull it out to read until the old man comes back.

Now this here paper is old and soiled from much handlin'. I look at the date first and find it's five years old. That pricks my curiosity so I spread it out and—bam! Right there on the front page is a picture of old Doane himself! There's a headline over the story which says:

DOCTOR CORNWALLIS DOANE
FIRED FROM YALE FOR
PLAYING RACES.

Then there is a long story tellin' how Doctor Doane, of the English department of Yale, is kicked out by the president of the brain factory because the old fellow won't promise never to make another wager on a hoss race. It says that the old man has a weakness for the ponies and that every once in a while he'd shut down his classes and hike to the nearest track to dally with the Goddess of Chance. If Lady Luck smiled on him he'd stick around until she scowled, then he'd go back to the college and wait for another pay day. It seems that the old man had been bawled out a couple times by the boss of the college but it didn't have no effect, so finally they give him the gate.

I'm so interested in the yarn that I don't hear him when he comes back into the room, but suddenly I feel his eyes on me and I get awful uncomfortable. Something tells me I've stumbled onto a secret which the old man don't want known. But when I look up he's standin' there smilin' down on me like a teacher who's caught her pet kid with a pea shooter.

"Well, son," he says, still smilin', "now that you have discovered my horrible past, what do you think of it?"

"I think you got a raw deal at that brain factory," I tell him, and I mean it too. "But what was you, a doctor, doin' around a education joint, anyway?"

He just chuckles as if that question tickles him and says: "I'm not the kind of a doctor you surmise, son. I'm a doctor of philosophy."

"Oh!" says I, pretendin' I know all about them birds. "You ain't a pill doctor then? Well, doc, it's all the same to me."

I see a sorta pained look come into his face at this crack, and I'm wonderin' what's ailin' him, when he says: "Son, please don't call me 'doc.' I'm rather sensitive about that!"

I thought that was kinda funny, but I says: "All right, sir! If it's all the same to you I'll call you 'doctor.' Everybody around the tracks has a moniker of some kind, but I warn you that the gang will shorten the title to 'doc' right off the reel. You'll be Doc Doane to 'em from now on. Of course, if you say so I won't say anything about it!"

"That's all right, son," he comes back.

I was right about what the gang would do. At the sale that afternoon the mob heard me call Doane "doctor" and right away Handsome Harry Kearns, in transferin' the ownership of Patricia and Mike, which Doane buys at an outrageous price, says: "Well, doc, you've made a good buy and I wish you a lotta luck!" Down in his heart he was prob'ly saying: "Yes, I wish you a lotta luck and I hope it's all bad!"

Well, that was the beginnin' of a hectic period at Tall Oaks track. As soon as he got Patricia and Mike under his colors old Doc Doane began devotin' most of his attention to them. He didn't have much trouble whippin' Mike into shape, as the three year old was in fair shape when he got him from Kearns, and inside of a month he had copped a cheap six-furlong race. But Patricia was different, and, strange to relate, the old man seemed to love her most. He studied her like she was a book, and he'd often just sit and look at her for half an hour as if he hoped in that way to find out what was ailin' her.

I spent a lotta time at Doane's stable and me and him got to be good friends. One day when he was sittin' starin' at Patricia he says to me: "Son, did you know the man from whom Mr. Kearns purchased Mike and Patricia?"

"Knew him well," I tell him. "I was his exercise boy when Mike was foaled down in Kentucky. Why?"

"Tell me something about the first year Mike and Patricia were together," he asks.

"Well," I says, "there ain't much to tell except that a few days after Mike is born his mother dies. Patricia was in trainin' at the time and was a good hoss. She had won a string of races as a two year old and started her three-year-old season by breakin' the track record for the mile at Harwood Springs. But after Mike's mother died Patricia went bad. She sulked and turned against her owner, trainer and hostler. She didn't seem to care a rap about anything but Mike. She'd be decent to anybody if she was with him. We used to watch her playin' mother to him and there was something almost human the way she'd care for him and play with him. When he got big enough so's he could run she'd gallop around the pasture with him, chasin' him most of the time, as if she was playin' tag. And then, every once in a while they'd get in the corner up in the far end of the pasture and Patricia would give Mike a playful little bite on the shoulder and away they'd go, Mike always in the lead, and Patricia at his heels. But when we'd send her to the post she wasn't worth a cent. She never won a race after Mike's mother died, although she was entered regular. Sometimes she'd work out fine—step fast enough to win from almost anything in trainin'. I've seen her and Mike step six furlongs in one minute and ten seconds, which is goin' some for a hoss on the bush circuit. But in the afternoon she was just a bust. Mike developed fast. He showed lots of class as a two year old, but he's simply a sprinter. Six furlongs is his distance. He's a front runner, too—always gets away first and fast. You know what he's done as a three year old, so I don't have to tell you!"

"I see," says the doc, with a far-away look in his pale-blue eyes. "She mothered Mike. Um! Maybe that's it." That's all he says, but I see he's learned something he thinks is important.

The day after I give the old man the dope on Mike's early youth I'm settin' in my favorite spot on the rail just at dawn, when I see the doc and two exercise boys come on the track leadin' Patricia and Mike. Old Doc Doane talks earnestly to the two boys a few minutes and then sends 'em on their way. The boys let the hosses gallop until they get to the back stretch, where they let 'em down. Mike leaves Patricia three or four lengths behind in the first furlong and comes around the turn still holdin' his lead. Then the boy on Patricia pulls the leather and under strong urgin' Patricia moves up and overhauls Mike at the eighth pole. I clocked 'em for the six furlongs and my watch shows they cover the distance in one thirteen, which ain't startlin'.

When I meet the doc in the afternoon I say: "Well, doctor, I see old Patricia stepped out this mornin'. Nothin' to write poetry about, but she did seem to make up under the whip. She might win a race yet."

"She'll win the second of her next two races," he tells me, and I have a hard time keepin' a straight face.

"Wouldn't kid me, would you, doctor?" says I.

"No, son, I'm not given to that sort of thing," he answers, and I can see he's serious.

Well, the next mornin' I clock Mike and Patricia again and both me and Umbrella Herb catch 'em at one twelve and two fifths for the six furlongs.

Umbrella Herb's nobody's dumb-bell and he says: "What's old Doc Doane doin'—givin' Patricia electric treatments? That's the best time that nag's stepped in two years."

"She'll win a race one of these days," I chirp, but he just gives me a grin, and says: "Yes, when she's the only starter."

A few days later old Doc Doane enters Patricia in a sellin' race over the mile route for nonwinners of a race in two years. They's an awful bunch of dogs entered in this contest, but Patricia finishes way back in the ruck. The winner went the distance in one forty-six, which is awful slow time for that distance. But old Doc Doane don't seem to be in mournin' when I drop around to see him after the last race of the day. I don't mention Patricia, not wantin' to hurt his feelin's, but he says: "Son, Patricia had a good work-out to-day. She'll win the fourth race day after to-morrow. I've entered her and Mike, and will declare to win with Patricia."

I'm beginnin' to doubt the old man's sanity, but I just say: "Well, I hope you're right, doctor. Who's she in with?"

He names the entries, which include Handsome Harry Kearns' good four year old, Filing Case, and "Cash" Menken's high-class Gooseberry. Now, I know that the race is between Filing Case and Gooseberry, with Gooseberry the best bet if Kearns and Menken ain't framin' to make a killin' with Filing Case. I know these two crooks don't shove in their checks unless they get together and agree on which horse'll be the winner, so I make up my mind to get a line on what's doin'.

Umbrella Herb comes to me an hour before the race and tells me that the gang is goin' to Filing Case so I know that Kearns and Menken got together the night before and ran the race in their room, settlin' on Filing Case to cop the coin. And I know, too, that there ain't nothin' in the race good enough to head off this hoss, so there ain't a chance for old Doc Doane's entry—Patricia and Mike. When I see the old man I tell him that Kearns and Menken are levelin' with Filing Case and suggest that he get a little bet down to cover his entrance fees for Mike and Patricia. He just shakes his head and says: "Son, your business is picking winners and getting others to bet on them. If you have a client you want to hold advise him to bet his money on my entry to win. You'll be money ahead after the race!"

Poor old Doc, thinks I, movin' toward the bettin' ring. He won't be convinced Patricia ain't got a chance until he sees Filing Case come down in front with Gooseberry in the second hole. Of course, his hoss, Mike, will lead the bunch for five and a half or six furlongs, where he'll stop, and Patricia will wind up with the also rans.

In the fourth race that afternoon I learned to respect old Doc Doane's judgment. The only right guess I made on that race was that Mike would lead the bunch for five and a half furlongs. At that point he quit just as Patricia stuck her nose out in front and kept it there until she raced under the wire, two lengths in front of the good thing, Filing Case.

I went over to the judges' stand after the official winner's number was hung up, and just as "Midget" Murray, old Doc Doane's own jockey, brought Patricia back to the ring. The Midget salutes the judges, dismounts and begins to unsaddle. Old Doc Doane comes ambling across the track from the infield where he's been watchin' the race just as the clerk of the scales calls to the judge that everything is O. K., meaning that the various jocks' weights, together with saddle, bridle, blanket and weight pads is correct.

Then I see Handsome Harry Kearns, madder than a wounded elephant, come to the front and I smell trouble for old Doc Doane. The contest which Patricia has just copped is a sellin' race—a race in which the winnin' hoss must be offered for sale at his entered price, which in Patricia's case was six hundred dollars. The owner, of course, has the right to protect his property by outbiddin' other owners who had entries in the race, but all that he bids over the entered price—six hundred, in them days at least, is split between the racin' association and the owner of the hoss which finishes second. As every race follower knows the sellin'-race rule is made for the protection of owners of cheap hosses—to keep owners from runnin' hosses outta their proper class. Nobody with sense is gonna enter a two-thousand-dollar hoss in a six-hundred-dollar sellin' race and take a chance of losin' his hoss or havin' to bid maybe a coupla thousand in order to protect him.

Well, when the associate judge comes out and asks for bids on Patricia, which he tells the assembled crowd is entered for six hundred dollars, me and old Doc Doane is surprised to hear Kearns bid seven hundred. Remember, Kearns has just sold Patricia and Mike to the old man for eight hundred and here he is biddin' seven for Patricia alone.

As I say, old Doc Doane looks surprised and says to Kearns: "Mister Kearns, I don't understand your wanting to buy Patricia back—you just sold her to me."

Kearns just smiles and says: "Well, doc, I've decided that I made a mistake in letting Patricia get away from me. She's a better hoss than I figured she was and I'm rather fond of good hosses!"

Meanwhile the associate judge is yelling for more bids. He looks at old Doc Doane and the doc nods: "Seven hundred and five." And he just keeps on raisin' the bid five dollars every time Kearns adds another hundred to his bid. Fin'ly Kearns runs Patricia up to one thousand dollars and the old man says nothin'. The associate judge looks at him and says: "How about it, Mister Doane? And five?" Old Doc Doane just takes off his skullcap, mops his brow and shakes his head. "Not to-day, thank you, sir. Mister Kearns appears more anxious to own Patricia than I am. He may have her!" With that he puts on his skullcap and saunters up the track, dignity in his stride and manner.

I feel sorry for the old boy and that night I go around to his stable for a chat. "Dirty trick that Kearns played on you this afternoon," I greets him. "If he aims to start a sellin'-race war there's a lotta owners around the bush circuit who'll be glad to accommodate him. He saw that you'd got Patricia back in form and decided to grab her. I say it was a dirty trick!"

"Yes, son," he admits, "Mister Kearns did take advantage of the selling-race system, and one might call it a trick. But you may have heard the old French maxim, 'Trickery comes back to its master.' Now, Mister Kearns thinks he did something smart, but he didn't son, he didn't. He thinks he can win races with Patricia, but he can't."

That remark almost floors me. I figured that old Doc Doane was honest to the core; that he wouldn't think of givin' a hoss a powder or resort to any of the tricks for which so many owners have been ruled off the turf for life. But here he is pract'ly admittin' that he is the only one that knows what to do to Patricia to make her run. He sees this funny look on my face and reads my thoughts. "Now, don't think wrong of me, son," he says. "I never give my horses anything but attention. Patricia was not tampered with in any way to-day. She won on her merits. But she won't win for Mister Kearns!"

He wouldn't say any more and I couldn't figure out what he meant. If Patricia was back in her old form, and she certainly seemed to be to-day, she could win from anything at Tall Oaks and I knew it.

Next day old Doc Doane comes to me and says: "Son, will you do me a favor? Will you let me know whenever Mister Kearns is preparing Patricia for a workout? I always like to know what the enemy is doing. You will not lose anything by providing me with this information, and I believe getting and giving information is your business, isn't it?"

I admit it is and I agree to keep him wised up to what Kearns is doin'. That was easy enough, as Umbrella Herb was pretty close to the crowd at Kearns' stable and Herb bein' under certain obligations to me gladly slipped me advance info on Kearns' plans for work-outs. These I turned over to old Doc Doane.

Handsome Harry worked Patricia every mornin' for a week and every time he sent the mare to the track old Doc was out there with his boys givin' his three hosses—Fern Dish, Carpet Sweeper and Mike—some work. I tried to figure out what the old man was drivin' at but whatever it was, he wasn't tellin'.

Patricia kept on showin' great form and soon every clocker on the track knew that she was ready for the race of her life. But I knew Kearns too well to think that he would shoot with her until he could get a good price in the bettin' ring—and a good price to him means at least four to one. As I expected, he entered Patricia in a race at the end of about a week. She was in with a pretty fair bunch of hosses, but Umbrella Herb tells me the day of the race that the gang at the stable ain't bettin' a dime on her. As I figured, Patricia finishes out of the money and from where I watched the race it looks as if Kearns' jockey, "Flash" Finn, almost choked her to death at the start. He got her away slow, too. When the race was lost Finn made a great splurge with the whip, floggin' the mare for half a mile, but he knew she didn't have a chance of winnin', and he pulls her up comin' past the paddock gate. The judges call Finn to the stand to question him about Patricia's poor showin' and I hear later that his excuse is that she sulked. Of course the judges knew Patricia's sulkin' habits and didn't want to take a chance of doin' Finn a injustice, so they just let him off with a warnin'.

A few days after this Umbrella Herb comes to me and says: "Kid, they's gonna be a melon cut at this here track Wednesday afternoon. You've been awful decent to me a coupla times and I'm gonna let you in on it. Kearns is gonna shoot with Patricia. The word has gone round that she's sulkin' again, and the price ought to be right. Gooseberry is gonna run for Menken, and the sharpshooters over at the Black Pine stable have entered Etching. Etching is at the top of his form right now and will be the hot favorite. But he'll go to the post cold as the north pole and he won't be in the picture when the winnin' numbers are hung up. Patricia's showin' in her last race wasn't so good, you know, but she's ready for the race of her life, and this time Flash Finn will carry a two-hundred-dollar ticket in his boot when he takes her to the post. The suckers will go to Etching, hook, line and sinker, and Gooseberry will be second choice in the bettin'. Patricia will come in for a little play because of her work-outs, but the danger of her sulkin' will keep the wise guys off'n her. But she won't sulk to-day, Kid. She'll be out there wingin' all the way and the price ought to be juicy. Just get your sucker and tell him to mortgage the old homestead and string along with Patricia!"

Well, that certainly was an earful straight from headquarters. I looked around and found old Doc Doane. Steerin' him to a quiet spot back of the paddock I give him the lay and advised him to get aboard the band wagon.

"So, they're going to wager on Patricia to-day, are they, son?" he says with a queer smile. "Well, son, if you have a client who wants to make some money tell him *not* to bet on this race. Patricia won't be in the money!"

"You were right the other day, doctor, when you told me Patricia would win for you," I tell him, "but I think you're all wrong this time. I know this bunch of bandits, and I know that when they frame a race they generally know what they're doin'. The wise money will be on Patricia this afternoon and she'll win unless she breaks a leg. She's been burnin' up the track in her work-outs, as you well know. I know because I've been clockin' her every time. And this guy Kearns and his pal, Piker Pete, is wise birds."

"Ben Johnson once remarked that 'No man so wise but may easily err, if he will take no other counsel but his own,' and I fear, son, Mr. Kearns has failed to take counsel with the only person at this track who could enlighten him as to Patricia," says the old man, and I know that he means he's the only guy that knows what'll make Patricia win races.

Well, I didn't take old Doc Doane seriously that day. I couldn't, knowin' what I knew. I was so sure he was wrong that I even bet some of my own dough on Patricia when the bookies offered three to one. My belief in the mare increased when the price on her was driven down to even money at post time.

Just before the race I went to the paddock for a look at the sure-thing, Patricia. She certainly looked like a real hoss and I was close enough to Kearns to hear him give his final instructions to Jockey Finn. They was: "Let Gooseberry make the pace to the three quarters. Then let Patricia down and bring her home. Don't worry about Etching or anything else. Etching will be out of it before he starts."

That was good enough for me. I went back and took a seat in the grand stand and began figurin' up what I'd cash in and what I'd do with all the dough. I'm still figurin' when the crowd yells: "They're off!"

I won't go into the agony I suffered durin' that race. I'll just tell you that old Doc Doane was right. Patricia's number was not among those present when the officials hung 'em up, and a rank outsider named Hit or Miss copped first money. The only consolation I got outta the race was the fact that Kearns and his gang of bandits took an awful drubbin'.

Umbrella Herb tells me afterwards that Kearns and his mob wanted to murder Flash Finn, believin' he had double-crossed them. But Finn swore Patricia was no hoss; that she wouldn't answer when called on, and that punishment had no more effect on her than on a Egyptian mummy. "Why," he told his fellow crooks, "I wore out two arms givin' her the leather. She simply ain't no hoss and that's all there is to it."

That night a young goat named Feed-box Kid dropped in on old Doc Doane. The old fellow was settin' in his easy-chair readin', but he looks up and gives me a merry welcome, sayin': "Come right in, son. I've been thinking about you and hoping you didn't lose any money on my horse, Patricia."

"Your hoss, Patricia?" I says. "What do you mean, your hoss?"

"I mean," says he, "that Patricia has come back home. She's in there now," he says, pointin' to the door leadin' to the box stalls. "Mr. Kearns repented of his bargain and obligingly sold her back to me, after the race to-day, for little or nothing. He said he didn't think she was worth her feed bill. A hard thing to say about a good horse like Patricia!" And he grins again.

"Well, doctor," says I, "if you knew how hard they was tryin' to-day you'd agree that Patricia ain't no hoss. They lost a lotta money on her this afternoon!"

"So I understand, son," says he, "but

they should have remembered what Bobby Burns said about the best-laid plans of mice and men."

"They prob'ly never heard of this Burns guy," I tell him, "but they won't never believe that you didn't have something to do with Patricia's losin' to-day. And from now on they'll be layin' behind a rock with a mallet waitin' for you. Better look out for them, doctor!"

"Thanks, son, for the warning," he smiles. "I'll give them a chance to even matters very soon. I'm starting Patricia at the first opportunity."

He got his chance the next week, but there wasn't a man around the track that would have gave a thin dime for Patricia's chances. Old Doc Doane entered her and Mike in a mile race for three year olds and upwards against the best hosses in trainin' at Tall Oaks. It was gettin' along toward the end of the meet and there was a lot of funny work goin' on among owners, bookmakers and jockies. A guy who wasn't in the know bettin' on anything that was runnin' didn't have no more chance than a charity worker at a misers' convention.

Piker Pete Silverman and Handsome Harry Kearns and a few of them birds that wouldn't give a cripple an even break was out gunnin' and they had their artillery aimed at old Doc Doane. They hadn't had no luck since the old man hit the bush circuit and they'd made up their minds to break him plenty.

Well, the day of this final race rolls around and it's a pipp. I was up and doin' early—tryin' to make get-away money for the jump to Oakwood, the next stop. I meet Umbrella Herb comin' from the direction of Kearns' stable. He's as excited as a bromo seltzer and twice as full of dope.

"Listen, Kid," he chirps. "I gave you a bum steer on Patricia, but me and you is friends and I wanna make up for that bungle. Here's the dirt: There's only five hosses in the last race to-day. The owners of the only ones that's got a chance are Cash Menken, Kearns and Piker Pete. Course you know that Pete is the real owner of the Black Oak stable, so he's in on the frame. Well, they've just had a meetin' in Kearns' stable and have decided on the winner. Pidgeon is the hoss! Now, keep this to yourself, Kid, and go get yours. He'll be as good as six to one because he wouldn't have a chance if the race was on the square. He's just a good hoss in with a lotta better ones."

"What about old Doc Doane's entry—Patricia and Mike?" I ask Herb. "Did they forget Patricia?"

He just gives me a witherin' look and repeats: "Pidgeon is the hoss! Go get yours!" and off he trots lookin' for victims.

When I tell old Doc Doane the plan of action, he shakes his head kinda sadlike and says: "Son, these men are changing the sport of kings into the sport of knaves. It would do no good to inform the stewards unless we had good evidence of what is being done. But these crooks must be punished and the best way is through their pocketbooks. Ordinarily I'm a modest better, but to-day, with your help, I'll teach these cheaters a bitter lesson. I'm not a rich man, but I'll stake everything I have except my horses on my mare Patricia. If they beat her to-day I'll go back to teaching and never make another bet!"

Knowin' the old man's love of the racin' game I figure this is pretty strong talk, but I couldn't see how Patricia could win after the showin' she made in her last time out when Kearns owned her. I knew she had sulked that day and that sulkin' was the best thing she did. There was no cinch she wouldn't pull her favorite trick to-day and I told the old man what I thought.

"Patricia will not sulk, son," he says, and there's something in his voice which tells me he knows what he's talkin' about. "She will win and at a long price—that is the price will be long until we begin betting and then it will shorten. I want you to help me place my money. There'll be a good bet down for you to pay you for your trouble. Get-away day is close at hand and you'll need money for that occasion."

Well, I think to myself, I've taken more chances than a sucker at a county fair, so why not one more? "You're on, doctor!" says I. "And I've got a hunch we'll give the bandits of the bettin' ring tuberculosis of the pocketbook, too. Let's at 'em!"

Down to the bettin' ring we go right after the fifth race. Old Doc Doane has a bundle of bills in his hand and I've got a bundle in mine. He tells me he'd like to start in on Piker Pete Silverman, so I lead him to Pete's book. I could see Pete lick his chops with joy as he sees the old man comin' with that bank roll. Pete's offerin' ten to one against the Doane entry

—Patricia and Mike—and them's the prevailin' odds around the ring.

"I understand you are the biggest bookmaker on the bush circuit, Mr. Silverman," the old man begins as we stop in front of Pete. "And you've boasted that you're going to break me before I fall into bad hands. Now, Mr. Silverman, I don't believe you're a very good gambler—that you are a very courageous gambler—certainly you are not a gambler of the Riley Grannon type."

I could see that Pete was gettin' mad. A gang has gathered around us, attracted by the odd-lookin' figure of old Doc Doane with his skullcap settin' on his long, white locks, and Pete is one of them guys who don't like to be given the razzberry. So, Pete cuts in on old Doc Doane's bawl-out, sayin': "What's troublin' you, Methuselah? Got a couple pennies you want to gamble on that dog of yours—Patricia? Or are you just rehearsin' a part for some show you intend to put on at the old folks' home?"

This don't even ruffle a hair of the old man's head. He just smiles his kind old smile and digs in again, sayin': "The young gentleman here with me tells me that you are called Piker Pete; that you once operated on the big Eastern tracks. Now, I am not disposed to go into history, but I presume there is some reason why that name was applied to you. If there isn't it is my intention to make a reason for the name here to-day. I want——"

By this time Pete's face is purple and he can't hold in no longer. "Come on, grandpa, make your bet—anything goes—anything from a dime to ten thousand," he screams. "I'll give you a chance to show your sportin' blood if there's a drop in your body, which I doubt! Put up or go chase yourself back to the nursery for folks in their second childhood!"

I look at old Doc Doane and he's still smilin', but there's a funny gleam in his eyes. When I see this, and get to thinkin' about Patricia, I think maybe the old boy's gone crazy, but before I have a chance to call him away or anything he's shovin' his bundle of bills at Pete and Pete grabs 'em and counts 'em. "Twenty-five hundred dollars, heh?" says Pete, and then turnin' to his ticket writer he says: "Twenty-five thousand to twenty-five hundred, Doane entry to win!" and in a second old Doc Doane has his ticket in his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Silverman," says the old gent. "I trust I'll find you here after the next race!"

"I'll be here," says Pete, "but you won't need to come back on business!"—meanin', of course, that Patricia won't win.

Well, I spread another thousand about the ring at the same odds, and when the ponies come outta the paddock the old man is holdin' tickets callin' for a winnin' of thirty-five thousand dollars—in case Patricia wins.

We got out to the infield, old Doc Doane's favorite spot to watch a race from. He don't seem nervous, but I'll tell the people I am. I look up at the grand stand—a sight which never fails to give me a thrill when there's a big crowd there—and I watch the boys jockeyin' for position at the barrier. Then it occurs to me that maybe Kearns and his gang has fixed Doane's jockey, Midget Murray! I go cold at the thought. But when I ask the old man about it, he says: "I've brought that boy up myself and I know he's honest!" Even so, I can't get my mind off the main question—the question which means I will or I won't ride the cushions of a train to Oakwood, and whether or not I'm gonna have the kopecks for a new spring outfit, and I'm beginnin' to sweat when I hear the roar which tells me they're off!

Then old Doc Doane starts to talk. We are standin' away from the rest of the gang of trainers, hostlers and owners in the infield, so he can talk loud without bein' overheard. He says: "Son, you're about to witness a real horse race. Watch Mike. See him go to the lead at once? Great front runner, son, great front runner! Look at Pidgeon, the good thing. Ha, ha! He's sure enough taking Mike's dust. There they go around the first turn. Look at the Midget on Patricia! That boy can ride. See Patricia cling to Pidgeon's flank. Know what Patricia's thinking, son? No, of course you don't. You don't know anything about psychology, do you, son? Well, I do. I studied the subject long ago. But I'll tell you what Patricia's thinking. She's thinking—— Goodness, son, look at Mike fly along that back stretch! He's setting a terrific pace for Pidgeon and Gooseberry and Patricia, but Patricia likes that! Right now Patricia is thinking, 'Mike, you little scamp, I mothered you when your own mother died. I felt so sorry for you when you were a little baby colt that I decided to take care of you. And I did, Mike, I did. I gave up racing so's I could devote all my time to caring for you—to loving you, Mike, you little scamp. I didn't want to race; I just wanted to play with you. And I'm playing with you now, Mike; I'm playing with you just as we used to play in the old days back in Kentucky.' Look, son, look! See old Patricia sneak up alongside of Pidgeon? Know what she's thinking now? Well, she's thinking, 'I'll just let you think you can beat me, Mike; but you can't, Mike, you can't. But I'll let you think you can until we get around to the head of the stretch. Then I'll gallop alongside of you, Mike, and I'll say, "Come on, brother, here's the way to run. Here's the way I used to run when I was your age!"' And, son, there's the secret of it all—the secret that that scalawag Kearns doesn't know. Why, look, son, they're rounding the turn and little Mike is still out in front —two good lengths—and Patricia is still letting him think he can beat her. Now they're coming into the stretch. Watch Patricia crawl up on Mike now and begin her play of showing Mike how to run. It isn't racing to her, it's just play. Look at Pidgeon. Poor Pidgeon! He was the good thing, son. And the others—Gooseberry and Filing Case—poor things that don't belong in Patricia's class. Funny, son, you were the one that gave me the clew. You told me about how Mike's mother died and how Patricia took care of him. Then—look, son, there goes Patricia! She's passed everything and is scooting after her little playmate, Mike—that's the old game she's always played with him. Yes, son, you gave me the tip. Then I saw the way she'd run in her work-outs with Mike—always let Mike take the lead until they'd gone about six furlongs. That's the distance they've gone now—six furlongs. And now Patricia is saying, 'Come on, Mike, you little rascal. Catch me if you can!' But Mike can't catch Patricia now—neither can any of the others. Look, son, she's almost home. Poor little Mike is through. Look at that finish, son—Patricia is now going under the wire—two lengths to the good. Fast race, son! Lord! Look at that time! Patricia's broken the track record. One minute, thirty-nine and one fifth. Good horse, that Patricia. Good horse!"

Well, that's the story. The old man went back and cashed in his tickets—thirty-five thousand dollars' worth. What did I get out of it? Why, boy! I learned something about this thing called psychology—a thing which every guy who follows the bangtails oughta know something about—and I left Tall Oaks on the cushions, with old Doc Doane, and a bank roll. That's what I got out of it!

"The Hollywood Touch," another story by Mr. O'Donnell in the next issue.

❧

HARD TIMES IN KANSAS

THE average Kansas farmer is a gold-medal, class-A, blue-ribbon champion in pessimism, gloom, discouragement and chronic "blues." That is what C. E. Denton discovered when he was secretary of state for Kansas and overheard a group of these despairing tillers of the soil discuss their tough luck at a crossroads store one evening.

"Great Jehoshaphat!" one of them opened the ball. "I've got no luck at all. Just look at my corn! It's growing so fast and it's got so heavy that gosh-dinged if I ain't afraid I can't get into it to cultivate it a second time."

"That ain't what I call real tough, hard, cursed luck," said another with a sniff. "Look at my wheat! It's so heavy that I know it's sure to fall and bind so I'll have the job of my life harvesting it. It's downright scandalous how heavy it is, what a terrible crop it is, putting all that harvest work on my back!"

"My oats the same way," lugubriously agreed the third man. "I'll get between eighty and ninety bushels to the acre, but it's going to be tough work cutting it."

"Well, fellows," put in the saddest member of the crowd, "farming in Kansas ain't noways near what it's cracked up to be. Did you ever stop to think how terrible hard these bumper crops is on the land?"

The Electric Storm

By Frederick Niven

Author of "The Subconscious Self of Boosey Bill," "Devil's Club," Etc.

The old prospector and the holdup man take new trails.

THIS story begins with the sharp mews, as of a kitten seeking its mother, of a catbird calling, and accentuating the loneliness. Through that loneliness Bill Hedley trudged on up the trail with an unswearving tread, left right, left right, deep-breathing and vigorous. He had escaped from Olalla Jail where he had been locked up pending trial for a bank robbery in which he had shot a man; and he was in high hope that he had made, as he worded it, his "get-away," here on this old Indian trail that was half hid by the red willows, most eager of all trees to obliterate the evidence of man's passage.

Perhaps it was as much the weather as the passing of Hedley that disturbed the catbird. It was an ominous sky indeed; the eeriest red light was in the deeps of the woods. The sense of utter loneliness among the stupendous displays of nature fell on Hedley, a sense of loneliness that, in his circumstances then, he did not shun.

He was not the only man, however, though he knew it not, in that great tumble of tree-covered hogbacks rising one beyond the other to the main range where the bare rocks protruded, holding up snow in their crevices and glaciers in their high clefts to the sky, a disordered sky, a sky where red clouds coiled like illumined smoke against ultimate blue-black opaqueness. Old Prospector Stanley sat on the dump before his tunnel some three miles farther on by the twisting trail, and a couple of thousand feet higher, looking out on the scene. Each was unaware of the other's proximity. Stanley could no more see Bill Hedley down there, under the fanning branches, than he could have seen an ant under a blade of grass.

The stillness, the tensity before storm, influenced both men. Always such electric days affected Stanley, depressed, troubled him. In such weather his sense of a fortune awaiting after his next blast in the tunnel was almost blotted out. The storm clouds, piling up, redly seething, reeked of calamity. He gazed on them, and through them, as it were, stonily on his past, a past of hard work for a grubstake, then high hopes going into the hills, tunneling and blasting, then "broke" again, and back to toil for one more grubstake.

Hedley was less affected by the sulphurous glow over the dark-green woods. He may not even have considered at first that the tenor of his thoughts was somewhat influenced by the display around and over him, as he fell into a mood of regret for the wild follies of his life. Somewhat cynical, he suddenly drew himself up in the midst of these considerations and informed himself:

"Hedley, my lad, I guess it's a case of, 'When the devil was sick the devil a monk would be; when the devil was well the devil a monk was he.' You're still a bit scared of swinging for pulling your gun on that plucky little teller in the bank at Orville. Will your notion of turning over a new leaf last?"

But he did himself not entire justice. He felt the tensity of the day with its ominous light and macabre glooms in the woods. He was smitten with a sense of the bigness of the world, of the immensity round the daily affairs of men.

"I guess this kind of weather in the mountains is sort of—sort of—well, solemn," he said to himself, aware then that the day had an influence on him.

Into his mind there came the memory of a farmhouse in Illinois, a trellised porch, an old man sitting in a chair reading aloud, an elderly woman stitching in another, her hand coming and going at a seam. That vision was conjured up by the odor of twinflower, much like that of the honeysuckle round his early home. A patch of it that he passed made a pool of its scent among the rougher odor of the balsam. His environment was influencing him.

And then—as with a smash from the sublime to the ridiculous—his olfactory nerves announced, in place of honeysuckle, the odor of frying bacon. He halted, sniffed. With the smell of bacon was the odor of wood smoke.

"Hullo! Hullo!" came a voice.

Hedley looked up; and there, between the boles of the trees close above he saw a wedge of gray blue. It was the débris from old man Stanley's workings; and atop it stood old man Stanley, a rifle in hand.

"Hullo, there!" said Stanley again.

"Hullo!" yelped Bill Hedley.

At that hail Stanley brought his rifle down.

"Come on up, whoever you are," said he.

Hedley climbed to the dump and saw an old man of lined visage, drooping gray eyebrows, bright eyes, dressed in prospector's shirt, drill trousers, and with Indian moccasins on his feet. The old man peered at him.

"There's been a b'ar hanging around a lot recently," he explained. "I heard you coming and wondered if it was Mr. Bruin back again. Oh, no," for Hedley gave him a wry smile, "I would not have shot you for a b'ar; no fear. A man don't shoot into a moving bush till he knows what moves it. I reckoned if it was a b'ar a-walking along, my holler would bring him up on his hind legs. No, sir, I'm too old a man to shoot at a moving bush. Say, ain't this one mournful day? I wish the storm would come to something, instead of just broodin'. It affects me horrible, waiting for it to break." Under the drooping brows he considered Bill Hedley again. "I don't know you. You don't belong to these parts, do you?"

"No. I'm just poking about having a look at the mountains here," replied Hedley.

"You're as wet with sweat as if you'd been in a crik. You ain't got your blankets along. You——"

"I'll just tell you how it is," said Hedley in response to an impulse, and he turned slowly round before the old man to disclose to the view of the latter the letters stamped upon his shirt: "O. J." Then he turned back full face again and looked blankly at the prospector.

"What was you in Olalla Jail for?" interrogated Stanley.

The calm accent of the inquiry relieved Hedley.

"A holdup," said he.

"Holdup," echoed Stanley. "Well, that ain't a low crime. There are crimes and crimes; and I've known a lot of holdup men in mansions on Easy Street. You're safe with me. You better get them prison pants off, and that shirt. Come in and I'll fix you up."

He led the way back over the dump, beyond the tunnel, to his shack and entered, leaned his rifle in a corner by the door, took the frying pan off the stove and set it on the hob, then rummaged in a big pack sack.

"How's that?" he asked, tossing out a gray-flannel shirt.

"That's fine," said Hedley.

Stanley rummaged on.

"Here's a pair of pants," said he, holding them up. "They're new. You can have them. I bought them by electric light, at night, and never seen the green in them till I left town. I hate green. Never worn them. They're what they call 'heather mixture.'"

"I don't like to rob you," Hedley drawled.

"Oh, shoot! I tell you I don't like green in clothes. But where do you aim to get to?"

"Over the mountains. They ain't liable to think I'm over there; they'll be watching the roads," said Hedley, hauling off his jail-stamped shirt and donning the proffered one.

"I can tell you how to get over," said the prospector. "It is easy enough when you know the way. It looks like a wall at the end. Don't go through the saddle. It is all snow beyond to a sudden drop. If you slid there you'd——" He nodded meaningfully. "You climb up a chimney in the top cliffs this side instead of trying the saddle. Other side there's a chimney takes you down. I got a claim up there, too, right on the crest, but I guess it won't ever be worked. Financiers always say, 'The showing is all right, but look at the expense of transport.' "

He turned away to the stove and spooned tea into the boiling water that danced in the billy can, while Hedley removed the jail trousers and dropped them on top of the discarded shirt.

"You have the cup and I'll drink out of the bowl," said Stanley. "Sit down and begin while I mix the flour for some more flapjacks."

The queer storm light increased in the little dusky shack and constant flashes of lightning illumined it; but still the rain delayed.

"It is good to have your company," said the old-timer. "There are times in these almighty mountains when a man gets lonesome and wishes he was through."

"Wishes he was through!" exclaimed Hedley, raising his head in astonishment.

"Yep," said Stanley; "you are just free of jail and enjoying your freedom. Sometimes I get so I feel I'm just waiting to get free of jail too—free of life. I get spells of feeling old and disappointed. But I reckon if a man kills himself he ain't any forader. He has his time to serve and can't get out of it. Them is my views; but on days like this I almost forget them. Guess it is constitutional. I'm something like some mountains you always see the lightning hit if it is anywheres near; iron deposits in considerable bulk, I suppose. The electricity in the air upsets me, makes me feel—— Oh, I ain't any good at describing. When I'm sick I can't even describe to a doctor. I just got to say, 'I feel punk!' It makes me feel the way I tell you; it makes me feel disappointed; and it is all such a big display it makes me feel little. I think of people I'd like to see and they are mostly dead. I'm too old to get up courage to begin afresh. It is a good thing I know the electricity is chiefly responsible. I just wait for the rain and then feel better."

"Begin afresh?" said Hedley. "Well, I was making resolves to begin afresh."

"You didn't kill anybody in that holdup, did you?" Stanley asked abruptly.

"I don't know," said Hedley. "He's in hospital, the teller in the bank. That's why I wanted to get away extra bad. I don't want to hang."

Stanley brought out his pipe, cleared out the bowl casually into a palm, rose, and passing to the door threw out the old tobacco ash. Coming back, said he:

"Well, well. I ain't the Angel Gabriel. I got an idea that birds do come home to roost—gen'rally. But you are young; you may begin afresh."

"I'm going to," Hedley announced. There was something in the old man's manner that caused Hedley to give him a new scrutiny, and then veil the scrutiny. What he thought was: "He is just a little bit queer."

"Have another cup of tea and help yourself to the last flapjack," said Stanley, sane and to the point. Opening the stove he put in first a new billet of wood, and then stuffed in the jail-stamped shirt and trousers.

"No, thank you. I'll finish with another mug of tea, please, and a smoke, but no more to eat. I like a cup of tea and a smoke after meals. I'm sure in your debt."

"That's all right," said Stanley. "I ain't the Angel Gabriel. I'm human. I guess the birds come home to roost mostly; but I ain't shooin' them home, to speak in parables like."

"A queer type," thought Hedley; but he had met it before. They sat silent a spell, smoking, in the eerily lit cabin, looking out at the view framed in the door, a view of lurid expanse that could hardly be called sky, an immensity of coiling vapors and the rocky ridge of a mountain by turns revealed and hid in it.

Hedley thought of his resolve to change, to amend, look back on his deflection from the straight path. First it was helping in a stock rustling; then some of the rustlers embarked on the "bootleg" running, and he joined them. On the way to Seattle from Grand Forks, British Columbia, the police had waylaid them. Their two cars had been riddled with bullets, but they had got away, leaving their punctured cars and one of their number killed. Then to raise the funds for a new high-speed auto he and another had planned the bank robbery and he had been captured.

An oppressive heat rolled into the cabin with the strange light.

"Yes, sir," Bill announced, "I'm through; and I'd better be getting on."

"Come along, then, and I'll point out where to make for," said Stanley. "You can see the upper rocks from just above here. Say—oh, say, it's awful deranging to a person to have all this electric discharge in the atmosphere. Look! I think the trees kind of get affected too."

Hedley glanced sidelong at the old man with that dubious look; but next moment he was having his way indicated to him, gazing up beyond the ridge of the last hogback to the high cliffs seamed with chimneys and wedged with screes.

"You better have a blanket," said Stanley. "I can spare one."

"Oh, I can't rob you," said Hedley. "You've done enough for me."

"You'll want it to roll in. You'll only make the top of timber by sundown, if I can talk of sundown on a day like this when there ain't a sun but only a kind of red firelight on everything, and no bush fire! Say, ain't it a horrible spectacle? I kind of admire it too, but it makes a person feel insignificant. How about sleeping here?" he ended abruptly.

"It's only afternoon. I'd like to be getting on," replied Hedley. "I won't try to thank you, mister."

"Stanley," said the old man as though imagining the jailbird had wished to know."

"Hedley is my name," said the escaped man.

Stanley held out his hand and crushed Bill Hedley's in his grasp.

"Pleased to have met you," he said.

"Pleased to have met you," responded Hedley, "and thank you for your kindness."

"Shucks, that's all right. I ain't no recording angel." He looked up and away at the peaks that were like red coral, and the wedges of snow that were as if bloodstained in that day's terrific sullen glow. "I tell you, when the storm does break it will break considerable up there. Was you ever in a storm above timber?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you know. It will rain lances. It will soak you in a second."

Hedley looked at the sky.

"I don't believe it's going to break for a while," said he. "I believe it will keep on like this all day and just peter out in heat, one clammy night; nothing come of it but a splash or two of hot water. It ain't even thundering yet."

"Maybe you're right. A man can't prognosticate in the mountains: But till it's over, and rain comes, I'll be lonesome," Stanley remarked. "I was thinking of company. You ain't but a holdup man; you ain't guilty of any of the other seven deadly sins, as might be said. If you was a dope peddler it would be different. There's a kind of man, battening on the destruction of his fellows, I think should be locked up for life. You don't look tough, either."

He mused a moment, and then repeated his invitation, or rather his lonely plea, for Hedley to stay.

"They'll never look for you up this way," he said. "They'll never look for you off the roads. Stay and smoke with a lonesome old man. I don't ask talk, even—just company while this here electric discharge in the air makes me feel so small, like a grasshopper."

What Hedley took for "queerness" was so greatly evident again in the old prospector's manner that he decided he would rather risk a drenched night camp than remain in the shack.

"I guess I'd better hike on," he said.

"All—right," intoned Stanley, and held out his hand again.

The grip of it was tremendous. It left on each finger of Hedley's hand the impress of the knuckles of the next. There was something of dementia in that grip.

Back to his loneliness in the cabin went Stanley, the electric flashes illuminating it weirdly. One who has known the ranges alone, when a guest has gone, may hazard how the old man felt. He knew the mountains, but here was the one kind of day which wore him among their grandeur, their more than heedless eternity. There would be that feeling, Hedley gone, that the ridges tiptoed up higher, that the trees ruffled more agitatedly. The voice of a catbird from below would be the voice of all sorrow. The fixed sea of forested hogbacks below would seem lonelier than ever; the high flaunt of rock above, among the great whorls of vapor, more than ever would seem as if heedlessly observing.

The psychoanalyst scribe of these days might consider that perhaps, when he first took up his rifle from the door, that action was at some thought of self-preservation, merely to remove it from a place where it might act as a lightning attractor. And then the gloom, the macabre glow, the sense of waiting, waiting, expectancy, the sense of failure, of loneliness! Perhaps he picked up a fragment of his ore and gazed at it ruefully.

II.

Half a mile on Bill Hedley heard the report of a rifle. It rasped loud, and the echoes of it ran in the defiles of the hills. He halted abruptly.

"Something happened to the old man," he thought, and then: "No, he felt so lonesome after I left he wants me to stop with him the night. It's a signal for me, the poor old galoot."

He hesitated, and as he stood there, uncertain, there was a blinding glare of light overhead, followed immediately by a crash as of the rending of metal, tremendous, deafening, then a sound of rushing wind, of disturbed trees, of rain—a deluge. It came down as in silver sheets rather than in drops, and Hedley wheeled and went tramping back.

"He'll think I've come back because of the rain," he mused. "He won't do me the credit of thinking I'm coming to see if he wants me!"

Up the dump he clattered, on across to the cabin and entered, to stand stock-still, staring. On the floor lay Stanley, dead, his carbine rifle beside him; he was shot through the heart. Bill Hedley realized that he had taken his own life, with a moccasined toe pressed to the trigger.

"Shot himself," said he. "The poor lonely old gesabe! Guess his ore ain't worth a hill of beans, and he knew it."

He looked on the dead man in pity. The sight of that fallen head moved him deeply. He dragged the body on to the bunk and looked down on the face, amazed at how speedily the lines on it had lost their deep-chiseled appearance. Without, the rain poured down. It drummed on the roof of split-cedar shakes; it hissed over the leagues of lower forests. The lightning blazed, and the thunder crashed like the upsetting of gigantic drays laden with steel rails. Then a coolness fanned into the place; the tensity of all that day was over.

"The poor old galoot! He ought to have waited for the rain, especially with his views on having to face the game."

Suddenly it came to him that if he were traced here there would be a new charge against him, hardly to be denied; and the thought had no sooner entered his head than there was a form in the doorway and a voice called:

"Come on up! There's a deserted——"

At that the voice abruptly ceased. Hedley had swung round, and the man in the doorway flicked a revolver to view.

"Put up your hands, Bill Hedley," he said.

Hedley did as he was bid, with a sinking sense that the day had come to its climax with him. Two more men came in, their clothes pressed close to them by the deluge, so that they looked as if they were incased in gleaming metal. They stood beside the sheriff of Olalla.

The weird red light had gone from the sky with the rain. The corners of the cabin were all in shadow. One of the men saw an old-time miner's candlestick that had been thrust in one of the logs. He drew forth a tin box and, waving the moisture from his hands, carefully took out a match and lit the candle. All its radiance seemed to centralize on the old but strongly pacific face of prospector Stanley.

"Gee!" said the sheriff at sight of that. "You seem determined to get a murder charge against you, Hedley. The fellow you plugged in the bank is progressing favorably; he's out of the woods. And here you go and do this. What did you do it for—a change of clothes?"

"I didn't do it," said Hedley. "I heard the shot and——"

He saw the men look him up and down, saw them considering the shirt he wore and the heather-mixture trousers—with their green thread that Stanley disliked.

"Cold up here," said one, and lifted the stove lid.

There came out a smell not of wood smoke; and probing in the stove the man drew forth the smoldering, agglutinated remains of the prison trousers.

Hedley tried again.

"I didn't shoot him," he said. "He gave me these things. He——"

The sheriff stepped to him and felt him over.

"All right," he said. "You can put your hands down." He looked across to his partners. "Just examine that rifle there."

One of them took it up and drew the bolt. His action ejected with a flick a spent cartridge.

"Well," cried out Hedley, "you have no witnesses. I tell you he gave me these things, and I went on, and then I heard a shot and came back. He did it himself. He was queer a bit, and he was talking about being lonesome and how——" He stuck.

He remembered also what Stanley had said about how the birds come home to roost. His teeth met grimly. He would swing, he thought, for the murder of Stanley, whereas he might have received but a short sentence after all for the holdup.

"I guess we are witnesses enough," the sheriff remarked, staring at him grimly.

A feeble flicker of lightning brightened the shack just as if the candle had sputtered, and a long time after a low rumble of thunder followed from far off.

Bill Hedley had no answer. He guessed they were—witnesses enough. And at that moment he touched the bottom of his world where, he felt, all resolves to amend were in vain. It was one more turn of the screw. But he did not rise and rail, unstrung. He sat there in utter quiet. For the first time in years he prayed, and it was not a prayer for help. It was for forgiveness and pity over days misspent.

"What's this?" asked the man who had examined the rifle, but Bill paid no heed.

He did not notice that they had clustered together at the table. It took the hand of the sheriff on his shoulder to draw him from the depth of dull agony and regret. The sheriff held a sheet of paper before him. Bill stared at it as though stunned.

"Read it," said the sheriff. "I guess you didn't forge that to make all clear for you in case of inquiries."

On that sheet of paper was scrawled, clearly by one demented despite—or all the more, one might say perhaps—the phrasing:

> I, John Stanley, of sound body and clear mind, am too lonesome to stay on here. All my friends are gone, and perhaps I may join them this way. If I can't I'll be getting on the trail, and it can't be more lonesome. It cannot be any more lonesome.

He had written that twice.

It took a little time for the full sense of it to sink into Hedley's mind; but the memory of that day never wholly left him, and always its influence was with him. His time served, and the additional time also for the flight, he came out of Olalla Jail to a new world, a changed man, and ever after, in thunderstorms, wherever he was, he would remember that day of human loneliness, and the depths of contrition, without hope, out of which he had climbed.

More of Mr. Niven's work in future issues.

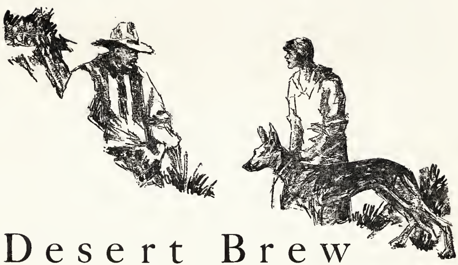
A NEW NAME FOR OLD STUFF

WHEN Senator Caraway of Arkansas came back from Europe last fall, he got his official ear full of the stratagems by which the upstanding American citizen figures that he can keep down his customs bill for imported articles and at the same time maintain that high standard of honor for which he is famed. Mr. Caraway listened, learned and laughed. But the biggest laugh he got was given him by a woman.

She had declared that she was bringing into the country only what she had taken out of it, and that this consisted entirely of wearing apparel. She did not even blush when, at the bottom of the first of her trunks inspected, the customs official discovered twelve large bottles of whisky.

"Madam," demanded that officer with pardonable sarcasm, "do you call these wearing apparel?"

"Certainly," she replied with no visible diminution of dignity; "those are my husband's nightcaps."



Desert Brew

By B. M. Bower

Author of "Bootlegger's Luck," "Goat Pro Tem," Etc.

(A Four-Part Story—Part IV.)

CHAPTER XXV.

CARTER.

CARTER, the prospector with the expensive cigarettes, heard a dog barking, away off somewhere in the sage. "Wooh! Wooh!" A wait, and then again, "Wooh! Wooh! Wooh!"

He slowed, killed the engine that he might catch any other sound in the direction of the barking, and listened. In the windy dusk the sound was weird, full of a boding melancholy.

"Funny thing," he said half aloud. "I'll swear that's the truck, away ahead there down the slope. These glasses don't lie, and that barking is behind me and away off to the left, I should say." He stood up, leaning out of the car, and peered out across the scraggy growth of sage and greasewood.

"Wooh! Wooh!" Then an indescribable, long-drawn howl.

"Better take the dog's word for it," Carter decided after a long period of hesitation while his eyes argued with his ears. "Broke down, maybe, and are trying to walk back. But you'd think they'd follow the truck trail, at that."

Carter's shrewd eyes appraised the little group as he drove up, lurching over hummocks and brush roots without much regard for tires or springs; Joe, sitting with her father's head in her lap, watched apathetically his approach, but Bill lay sprawled in the sand with his face pillowed on his folded arms where he had finally gone down.

"Well! Pretty well used up, eh? Mrs. Marshall was afraid something might have happened to you, so I came out to locate the trouble. My name is Carter. Where's the truck? Broke down?"

"Give Bill a drink," Joe said hoarsely. "He's been carrying dad all day."

"Out of water, eh?" Carter looked at her curiously while he climbed out with a canteen in his hands. "Ladies first—then Bill can drink all he wants."

But Joe waved the canteen away impatiently, her pinched face hard under the big hat.

"Look after Bill first. Dad and I can wait. We had it easier than he did. Go on."

Carter gave her another searching look, dropped the canteen close beside her and got another from the car.

"Looking after Bill may take a little time," he observed dryly. "There's enough to go around."

From the corner of his eye he watched

Joe slosh water over her dad's head and face before she lifted the canteen to her own lips. A game kid, he thought approvingly, and shook his head at an unpleasant suggestion that edged into the front of his mind.

"I brought grub along, too," he said to Joe when he had got Bill on his back and was pulling him out of the torpor into which he had fallen. "Better bring it from the car—or wait a minute and I'll get it. I know just where it is. Didn't know how long I might be out, and the ladies said you didn't take anything much in the way of supplies. Here it is—fresh milk, hard-boiled eggs and bread. That will stay you till I get time to boil a pot of coffee. I'd give your father a little milk, if he can take it, and you eat the solid food yourself, Miss Marshall. This long individual will be up and eating in a mighty short while, now. But save room for a cup of coffee. That will set you up better than anything."

Blunted with fatigue, Joe was dully astonished that she could do no more than nibble at the food. Her father opened his eyes, consented to swallow a little milk, and mumbled an unintelligible sentence or two which Joe was thankful this strange man could not understand.

Bill sat up and stared groggily at Joe and at the boiled egg she was languidly peeling, looked at the Ford, at Carter, at Marshall.

"Saved, old dear," Joe muttered whimsically when Bill's bloodshot eyes came back to her and the egg.

"Bring a blanket in the fall—so—won't catch—cold," Bill mumbled, and lay down again and closed his eyes.

"We walked all last night and all today and part of yesterday," Joe explained apologetically. "And to-day Bill had to carry dad. He's tired."

"I reckon he is," Carter agreed, and began gathering brush for a small camp fire. "Nothing like coffee to set a man on his feet."

Joe watched him pottering about the fire, making countless trips to the Ford and always returning with something that would add to their well-being. When the fire was going and coffee in the sooty bucket he used for the purpose, Carter came and knelt beside her, feeling Marshall's pulse with quiet finger tips that seemed to know their business. She watched Carter's face and could read nothing from his downcast eyes and the lips twisted to one side in a humorous half smile. He seemed an ideal rescuer, she thought, and wondered who and what he was.

"Heart's going along all right," he announced with a swift look into Joe's face. "Exhaustion is all that ails him and our long friend, Bill. Don't go to sleep if you can help it, little girl. We'll have supper and then we'll drive back and you can go right to bed. Bill," he added with an amused side glance, "was over the edge already. I'll have a time waking him up for supper, I expect."

Joe stared back across the desert, softening now as the shadows deepened. The hills that held Death Valley so jealously close were very beautiful, she thought. Terrible, too, when one knew just what they were capable of doing. Carter did not seem to know that they had reached the end of their strength and that he had saved their lives. He did not seem to think it was anything much—nothing to make a fuss over. He could laugh at Bill! Carter simply did not know what it was like.

"It's only about ten or twelve miles to the ranch," he observed casually, as if he had read her thought. "But I've got the habit of stopping and boiling my coffee wherever I happen to think of it. No use waiting."

"Ten miles or ten hundred," said Joe resentfully, "we never would have made it. We couldn't have gone a mile."

"Well," Carter twisted his mouth in that funny smile of his, "you think you couldn't have, now it's over. But you could. A person never knows until he has to do it."

Joe's lips parted, but she closed them tightly. Why argue the point? They had looked death in the eye, that day—but what use was there in telling Carter? Let him think what he pleased and laugh at Bill if he liked, and say that her dad was only tired out. She silently called him a dumbbell, which proved that Joe was rapidly winning back to normal.

After that, coffee was ready, and Bill was dragged out of slumber a million miles deep and made to drink a cup of coffee; whereupon he drank two more of his own accord and decided that he would not sleep out there until fall, but go in with the others to the ranch. Marshall they had to lift into the car, but beyond that not even the anxious-eyed Mrs. Marshall saw more than the ordinary effect of being stranded in the desert for a time. But Bill knew, and so did Joe, how nearly the desert had beaten them.

"Feeling pretty pert again, are you?" Carter asked of Bill when that sore-muscled young man walked stiffly to the door of the bunk house after about twenty hours in bed. Carter was sitting on the bench beside the doorway, smoking his expensive cigarettes and looking, Bill thought, as if he were waiting for something or some one. It's hard to describe that quiescent attitude of watchfulness, but nevertheless a man's sixth sense usually detects it unerringly. Bill mentally squared off and threw up his guard.

"You couldn't inveigle me into any kind of a foot race," he yawned after a pause. "Maybe in five or ten years I may feel like taking a walk."

Carter twisted his lips to one side, cocked an eye up at Bill leaning against the door casing and gave a dry chuckle.

"Thought you'd stay put to-day, anyway. The little girl has been up for a couple of hours."

"Oh—Joe. Well, she's younger than I am." Bill outdid old Hank in letting himself down carefully to the doorstep, and he heaved a long sigh of relief when he was settled.

"How about that truck you drove into the desert?" Carter sent a quick, sidelong glance at Bill.

"How about it?" Bill was busy sifting tobacco from a can into his old brier pipe, and he did not look up. "Why, it'll stand hitched, I reckon, until I go out and bring it in. About to-morrow I'll go after it." He drew a match head sharply across a board and held the flame to his pipe. Carter saw his eyelids flicker and thought Bill was blinking at the smoke.

"You didn't run out of gas, or anything like that, did you?"

"Something like that," drawled Bill laconically, smoking with half-closed eyes and the look of a man still half asleep. But the mind back of that masklike face of his was furiously at work.

"You know, I got this man who lives on the other end of the ranch—Nelson, I think his name is—and we went out and brought the truck in, early this morning." Carter held up his cigarette, squinted at it thoughtfully and wiped off a gray collar of ash.

"Fine," drawled Bill, after a minute. "That lets me out."

"Or in," Carter amended softly.

"Or in—luck. I wasn't hankering for the trip."

"Funny you ran out of gas—the way you did," purred Carter.

"Ha-ha-ha," said Bill unemotionally. "I chortle with glee."

Carter pursed his lips, eying Bill unobtrusively.

"Feel like walking down to the garage with me?" A note of insistence crept into his purring voice.

"Putting it that way, no, I don't. I don't feel like walking anywhere," said Bill with conviction.

"But you *will* walk down there with me won't you?" The pur was leaving Carter's voice now and the insistence dominated quite frankly.

"Do you think I ought to be taken out and walked around for exercise?" Bill gave him a straight stare that could be interpreted as Carter chose.

Carter's lips pursed with brief amusement.

"That time will come, no doubt, but I wasn't thinking of exercise. I just wanted to show you something, Bill."

"I can't think of a thing worth walking ten rods to see," sighed Bill, packing down the tobacco in his pipe. "But I'd rather go than sit here and argue about going. It'll take a lot to rouse any enthusiasm in me this evening, though." He got up slowly, as if he could hear his joints creak, and went with Carter to the garage.

"You see," Carter explained silkily when they neared the truck backed into its place alongside the little building, "I like to be open and aboveboard whenever it's possible." He took Bill by the arm and piloted him to that side of the truck which held the big, red canteen on the running board. "I'd like to have you open that canteen, if you please, and examine the contents."

Bill looked at him.

"You don't want me to lift it, do you?" he inquired apprehensively. "Carter, it's all I want to do to lift a knifeful of soft-boiled egg! That's how crazy I am to take up the white man's burden."

"Open it," said Carter shortly. "See what's in it."

"Oh." Bill sounded relieved. "If I don't have to stoop over to do it." His long fingers fumbled languidly the screw top while his brain circled dizzily around Carter's inexplicable change of manner. He canted an eye toward the open canteen.

"That all? What's the joke?" he asked innocently.

"What's in that canteen, Bill?"

"Why—gas," Bill responded blandly.

"Gas! Smell it!"

Bill hated to bend, so he thrust in his finger as he had done on other well-remembered occasions, withdrew it wet and held it under his nose.

"Gas," he drawled mildly, though he blinked.

"Gas? Forget it!" snapped Carter, his lips tightening.

"I can't," Bill objected pensively. "I drank some once. I never will forget it."

Carter grinned a straight, sardonic grin without the humorous twist.

"It's the kind of gas a good many men drink."

"Yes?" Bill lifted his eyebrows in surprise. He shook his head. "Damn fools, if they say they like it."

"This isn't getting you anything." Carter gave Bill a hard look, thrust his own finger into the canteen and sniffed. His eyes opened slowly, staring resentfully at Bill. "Where's the moonshine that was in that canteen?"

"I dunno." Bill shook his head with a helpless gesture. "The moon ain't up yet."

"Well, be as funny as you like." Carter's jaw squared. "You're under arrest, from now on. How you got away with that booze I don't know—yet. You'd have done better if you'd left it alone, I'll tell you now. Here. We'll hang the decorations on you since you're so clever." New and shiny handcuffs slid with an implacable suddenness upon Bill's wrists. "I'd have sworn you never left the bunk house to-day, and Marshall I know is out of the game at present. Here's the warrant for your arrest. You may as well read it."

"Well, if that isn't the *dumbest* thing to do!" Joe coming from the stable with her hat full of eggs and her dog at her heels, halted beside them and stared furiously from Carter's grim face to the handcuffs. "You're exceeding the speed limit, Mr. Carter, arresting Bill. I don't suppose you know who he is!"

"Don't I?" Carter pursed his lips.

"No, you don't. He's—well, he's really Woods Morgan. He writes books, and he's a poet. Mother has some of the books he wrote. He's—well, he's just out here enjoying himself!"

Bill's lips twitched.

"Mother doesn't dream who he is, nor dad nor Barb—well, Barby knows. She can tell you herself that I found his typewriter and stuff, where he'd started a lovely sunset before ever he came here at all."

"Yes—but you see, little girl, I'm not arresting him for writing poetry—though he's liable to hang for it some day. But this is bootlegging. Now you'd better run along in to your mother and don't worry about Bill."

"Bootlegging?" Joe stood perfectly still and stared at Carter with wide-open eyes. "Which boot?" She stamped a foot. "If you want to get rid of me, you'd better tell me," she stated with ominous calm.

"I s'pose. Well, Bill started out across the desert with his blankets and five gallons of whisky. That canteen, there, was full of it."

"Was? I never saw him drink it."

"It was there when I drove the truck in, about noon." He gave Bill a resentful glance.

Joe went forward like any other curious child and sniffed at the open canteen, dipping her small finger in just as the men had done. She raised her head and looked at Carter with frank disdain.

"Why, that isn't whisky, stupid. That's gasoline."

"Didn't you know Bill had whisky along when he took you out there into the desert?" Carter eyed her sharply "You must be old enough to know——"

"I know I started out to find daddy, with my dog. And Bill came after me with the truck, to haul daddy back. And then when we got stuck in that wash, we started on afoot, and found daddy, and Bill was carrying him home on his back. I don't see what he'd want whisky for, Mr. Carter. Bill's quite a nice man when you know how to take him."

Carter laughed shortly.

"I know how to take him, all right. Now run along in to your mother before you break all those eggs." He looked at Bill and jerked his head toward the bunk house. "You can go back and take a nice long sleep," he purred. "I'll tie you so you can't fall out of bed." Bill moved toward the bunk house, his shackled hands held somewhat awkwardly before him.

Ahead of them, Joe was walking up the path with her hatful of eggs in the crook of her arm, singing as she went. And the burden of her song was, *"Yes-sa!* We got no-o bananas!"

Bill looked after her and again his lips twitched a bit.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ROMANCE.

"AND she says I'm just here to enjoy myself," mused Bill aloud, regarding his manacled hands with a certain grim humor. "You know, Carter, I can't quite get your point of view. I'd take it as a natural, human mistake if you had grabbed me for murder, with all that bloody evidence on the bed and floor—which I see you've covered up. Something surely took place here the other night while I was off somewhere else. For a while I thought you had wandered in here and were the victim of an assassin. Since you turned up all right, I must confess I'm all up in the air. If it's really bootlegging you think you want me for, why the handcuffs? I didn't suppose peddling booze was that desperate a crime."

Carter, lounging on the opposite bed, over which he had spread his own blankets, pursed his lips.

"Bootlegging, as such, is sometimes desperate; more often not. But I'll tell you, my long friend, that any man who could slip out from under my nose the way you did to-day, and destroy the evidence as you did, needs leg irons as well as handcuffs. You're a smooth hombre, I don't mind saying to your face. I'd have sworn you stayed on that bed from the time the woman packed grub to you at noon, till you came out the door a while ago. I ought to have stayed inside and kept one eye on you, instead of lying out in the shade with one eye on the door. What did you do—go through the window?"

"Well," Bill deliberated, "if I did it wouldn't be the first time."

"I ought to have thought of that. But you pulled that all-in stuff so realistic I fell for it. I'm telling you, Bill, so you'll know I ain't liable to fall for the next stunt." He selected a smoke from the package of cigarettes on the window sill, and felt for a match. "I'm sorry now I kept that little find to myself, out there. Wasn't quite sure of Nelson—but I know he didn't get away with the booze. I made sure that he went on home before I left the truck. I'm satisfied that he didn't know it was there."

"I'm listening to all that with bated breath—and I would like to spell it b-a-i-t. But what about the—er—whatever took place in here? I don't give a damn for the booze, but what about that blood?"

"Oh, that?" Carter turned down a corner of his blankets and glanced carelessly at the print of bloody fingers on the pillow. "That's no mystery, whatever. A little mistake. Our gentle boss, Charley Marshall, just about scalped old Hank Hawkins. I think he was after you, my long friend. I'd have been out there after you much sooner if I hadn't thought it best to take Hank Hawkins in while I had the chance. He needed some stitches; six—or seven, I forget which." He squinted across, studying Bill's face, which did not tell him anything at all. "I may as well tell you that Hank came clean."

"He did?" Bill looked up and grinned joyously. "I'll bet the old devil hollered like a whipped pup when the water touched him. What did you use? Condensed lye?"

Carter grunted and settled back against the head of the bed with his eyes half shut.

"No," he retorted, "they found out you had about all there is in the country."

Bill grinned again, vouchsafing no reply to that thrust.

"Sorry I can't hold you for murder, Bill. It'd please me to death. But corpses are scarce this year."

"I don't know," Bill drawled maliciously. "I've planted a good many dead men around here and there in the desert. You might be able to dig up some evidence—if you could hang onto it."

Carter swore softly.

"I'll find out where that whisky went, don't worry about that. And it isn't going to make things any easier for you when I do."

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you. You may have to cut my butter for me, but I can pick a chicken wing and eat corn on the half shell, and for once in my sad life

I can take a piece of pie up in both hands without feeling ashamed of myself. If they have pie for supper." He sighed wishfully. "And so old Hank inadvertantly took a bath! Well, well!"

"Not so well-well for you, young man. Hank took it for granted it was you that tried to kill him. I never saw an old man any fuller of spite. In getting some of it talked out of his system, he spilled enough evidence to settle your hash for some time to come. He tried to protect Marshall, but he made up for it by giving up the whole works, so far as you are concerned. I don't need that canteen evidence so bad—you're cinched tight without that, with what Hank spilled on the way to town."

"I always did say most men wear whiskers to hide a mean mouth," Bill sighed. "Hank goes to prove I'm right."

Barby and Joe arrived then with Bill's supper and the word sparring was suspended for a time, neither man feeling that he had gained much by the verbal thrust and parry; certainly not Carter, who had hoped to goad Bill into making some incriminating statement.

Barby gave Bill a look that warmed his heart, and sent a blasting glance toward Carter.

"Joe told me all about this outrageous performance," she said bitingly. "Fortunately, my aunt is spending all of her time with Uncle Charlie, so she doesn't know about it. We don't want her to know, and so you'll have to keep Bill in the bunk house and we'll bring his meals to him if you're going to be silly enough to go on thinking he's a criminal, and keep those horrible handcuffs on him. If auntie comes to see you, Bill, can't you hide them some way? She's worried about sick over Uncle Charlie, and Joe and I don't want her to know there's any trouble over whisky. Of course you're innocent, and Mr. Carter probably planted some himself, just to frame up a case. I've heard that they do that, right along. In Los Angeles the police are simply frightful that way. Little Joe says you didn't have any whisky at all, when you went after Uncle Charlie. Did you?"

"Not a drop," Bill assured her solemnly.

"We thought that big canteen was full of gas—and it is," Joe put in, her eyes round and childlike in their innocence. "I got the car stuck in a wash, and the front tire kept going flat, so we thought we could make better time on foot. That's the truth, Barby. It's a perfect washout, trying to pretend Bill hauled out whisky in a gas canteen. Why, it wouldn't be fit to drink, if he did! I never heard of anything so dumb. Did you, Barby?"

Barby shook her head and poured Bill's coffee, adding whipped cream and sugar lavishly, though Bill would have preferred his coffee black.

"Oh, well, some men are like that. It would kill a detective to think, I suppose. They seem to be afraid to try it, anyway. We had better be careful or he'll say we are bootleggers, ourselves!"

"I've heard of queerer things than that," Carter observed grimly. "How old are you, Joe?"

"Me?" Joe looked at him surprised. Then she clapped her hands together softly and gave Barby a triumphant little laugh. "How old shall I say, Barb? Can I get away with an extra—do you mean you'll let me be a queen of the bootlegging gang, and get my name in the paper, and everything? I'm as much of one as Bill is. Er—how old do I need to be, Mr. Carter?"

Carter impatiently drove a small smoke cloud away from before his face and looked at Joe with a steadfastness that should have made her squirm.

"What grade are you in, at school?"

"Well," Joe frowned and bit her lips, "I've passed the seventh, all right, but I was conditioned in arithmetic and language. You can't tell a thing by the grade," she added eagerly. "I'm just *dumb*—for my age, and I'm a——" She shook back her hair and gave Barby what was intended to be a secret nudge. "I'm eighteen years old!"

"Yes?" Carter gave his twisted smile, and a twinkle was in his eyes. "Wel-l, I've always been taught not to contradict a woman when she gives her age, but it seems to me they start juggling pretty young in these parts. Some day you'll want to knock off about as many as you're adding now. Eighteen—h'mm. Pretty nearly old enough to marry Bill when he gets out of jail. You like Bill pretty well, now, don't you, little girl?"

Joe flushed hotly, but confusion could not reach her tongue.

"And Barby wearing that headlight diamond Bill gave her? I guess you aren't always such a good guesser, Mr. Carter. I expect to hunt up a hero of my own when I grow—er—when I get ready."

Carter's eyes went to Barby's left hand, which trembled a bit under his gaze. Joe's eyes went to Bill's blank face, her eyebrows pinched together warningly. Carter looked at Joe and he laughed lazily.

"Careful, little girl. Those last four years kind of skidded for a minute, didn't they? First thing you know, you'll be talking exactly like the little fourteen year old you really are!" His glance went to Bill. "Poetry must bring a pretty good price, to pay for a ring like that," he said ironically. "I must apologize to Miss Barby for the humiliation of the handcuffs. I rather think after all that you won't try to break away, under the circumstances. If you'll explain why William Woods Morgan is passing himself off as Bill Woods when he's engaged to this young woman here, and is on a visit to her——"

"Why, you're awfully dumb if you can't see that this is a romance," Joe interrupted him headlong. "Why, mother doesn't *dream* they're engaged! She thinks Barby is going to marry another young man that's got scads of money and oil wells, and can put it all over a mere author as a rich husband. So Bill—well, it's frightfully darling of him, don't you think, to give Barby a ring like that, and come here——"

"H'm! I thought you found Bill's typewriter."

"Why, Mr. Carter, that's the *ro*-mance!" Joe wailed in a tone of intense exasperation at his blindness. "Barby *didn't* know who he was, at first. But"—spreading her hands in eloquent disdain of further explanation—"you know what love is." She flung an arm around Barby's shoulder defensively. "And you needn't think Barb is such a dud she'd take up with a bootlegger, either."

"Not if she knew it, I'm sure." He reached slowly into his pocket, as if he were yielding to a sentiment of which he was half ashamed, and drew out a key. "I may not know what love is, but I'll be as romantic as anybody and take a chance. Miss Barby—and Joe, you listen to me—I'm going to trust to your honor and your regard for Bill's welfare, and take off these handcuffs. But first I want you both to thoroughly understand that trying to get away from me would be the most foolish thing he could possibly do. My duty as a Federal officer would make it necessary for me to shoot your friend Bill. I'm sure you wouldn't want that to happen. He will get absolute justice, I assure you, and if he is innocent he should have no trouble in proving it and this will be merely an adventure added to your romance. I shall have to shackle him at night, but I can leave him free during the day if you will promise not to encourage or help him to escape. Do you promise that?"

"Certainly," said Barby stiffly, staring down at Bill's plate, where his supper remained untouched.

"Joe—honor bright, little girl! No fibbing—this isn't a matter of age."

Lips pressed firmly together, Joe nodded her front hair into her eyes and drew an invisible cross over her middy pocket.

"Cross my heart an' hope to die," she mumbled rapidly. "Oh, Mr. Carter, I think it will be the giraffe's ear muffs to have Bill for a prisoner, if you are going to be human about it. Maybe this will be an inspiration to him. Bill, I'll disgorge your typewriter and Woods Morgan paper if you'll try and think up a bootlegger story to go with that perfectly marvelous sunset!"

"She says she was conditioned in language," murmured Bill, eying Barby sidelong. "Jerusalem, what if she had been perfect!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

BILL DOESN'T KNOW A THING.

SAFELY handcuffed with his right wrist to the bedstead, Bill managed his pipe with his left hand and meditated upon the many angles to the situation in which he found himself. He was surprised and secretly a bit gratified at the thrill he had known when Barby's name was so daringly linked with his own, and he found himself dwelling upon her blushes, in spite of his good sense and his pet theory that no man is better than a slave who is not master of his emotions. Joe he wanted to shake—and yet he had to thank her for startling Barby out of her calm. It was a purposeless kind of evasion which Joe had perpetrated, and beyond freeing him from the handcuffs for a part of the time he could not see what could possibly be gained by it. Carter would no doubt haul him to some town, where Bill would send some telegrams and do a little wire pulling and get himself out of the scrape.

"Ss-shush, fair captive, and listen," the voice of the irrepressible Joe murmured at the window beside him. "Yon tyrant eateth unsuspectingly of fried chicken in the castle, and what are you going to do about this funny bootlegging charge, Bill? Let him go ahead and think you are one?"

Bill slid the steel circle along the top rod until it was stopped by an upright brace, and did a simple contortion act that brought him facing the window.

"Old stuff, talking through the window, Joe. Hank did that up on the mountain—and that's one thing I'm anxious to understand. Be careful you don't get caught at it, kid. I'm afraid friend Carter might suspect you of other things not so guileless."

"I know." Joe was sober enough now. "I've stirred things up considerably, haven't I, Bill? Now, if the darn thing will jell the way I want it to, I think you can wriggle out of it."

"Clear as Puget Sound fog. Did you doctor that canteen, Joe? Of course you did, though. Bright trick—until he finds the whisky."

"I don't see how he can," said Joe. "I poured it all out into a coal-oil can, and filled up the canteen with gas. And then I packed the whisky down to the ditch and poured it in the water. Do you suppose it will smell up the meadow?"

Bill grinned and shook his head.

"Of course I wouldn't put that tube back in, for him to find and make matters look all the worse. I'm not quite that dumb, I hope. Bill"—she hesitated—"has he said anything about daddy?"

"That's what worries me, Joe. He hasn't. Old Hank was the one who got rapped on the head, and he thinks I did it, so he told a lot of stuff about me and kind of let your father out of it, I think. But kid, there's more to it than finding that canteen on the running board. No Federal agent bothers with small stuff like that, you know. There's a lot we don't know about, I'm afraid; and that's why I daren't say a word. I don't want to let your dad in for anything, and Carter's been nagging and fishing for something he thinks I know."

"About daddy getting whisky right along?"

"I don't know. I think it's something more than that, kid."

"I don't see what it could be." Joe shook her head. "Daddy's better, but I'm afraid to say anything to him. For one thing, there's mother always around close—and besides, daddy's got something on his mind and he won't talk at all, hardly. You know —what he was going to do out there in the desert, Bill. It would kill mother to know about that. If he were to be mixed up now with this horrible officer, he'd kill himself. I know it. He'd do it to save us from being disgraced. It's silly, but that's the way he feels about it and we've simply got to take his warped ideas for granted and look out for him. Bill, *do* you suppose he——" Her eyes finished the question which her voice refused to enunciate.

"Honest, I don't know. There's been something underground about this whole business. I've felt it all along, but I haven't been able to get hold of a single clew. Now, the fact that this man Carter is on the trail proves beyond all question that there's a lot of moonshining or bootlegging going on somewhere pretty close. Whether your dad is mixed up in it or not, I don't know, of course. I surely hope not."

"But you're afraid he is." Joe was silent for a space. "I am, too. You see, Bill, there are the roofing nails sprinkled in the road. How could daddy know he was going to be followed? He had those nails right with him, long before he knew you were going along in spite of him. You wouldn't think he'd be so secret as all that when he was just merely going to get whisky to drink. He never was before, when he was drinking. He nearly drove mother wild, he was so bold about it and the old dear was trying so hard to hide his sins for him; dad didn't care who knew it. And then again, why did he pull that stunt with the wrench? He must have been afraid you'd find out something."

"Say, aren't you afraid our enemy the sleuth will slip down here unexpectedly? Don't take a chance, kid."

"How dumb do you think I am?" Joe retorted impatiently. "Barb is going to begin singing 'My Sweetie Went Away,' the minute he leaves the dining room. I'll be milking the cow long before he gets here. Can you sing, Bill? Because we could manage to tell each other things that way. I know lots of the silly songs they're singing nowadays. If you could——"

High and clear rose Barby's careless

voice, singing that senseless ditty, "My sweetie went away—and didn't say——"

"Good night!" Joe hastily exclaimed, and that was the last Bill saw of her for a time. He was lying tranquilly on his back, right arm thrown up above his head, his pipe resting in the hollow of his left hand, when Carter came silently in through the door.

"Seen anything of that kid?" Carter demanded immediately.

"Lost her?" Bill lowered his pipe and glanced negligently at the man. "Joe's likely to be almost anywhere at any time, Carter. What's wrong?"

"She didn't eat her supper with the rest of us. Spoiled mine for me, I admit. I like to know where every one is when I'm in a position of this kind."

"Did you look in the corral?" Bill yawned and shifted his shoulders on the pillows. "About milking time, isn't it?" Then he chuckled, his eyes going again to Carter with a humorous light in them. "Funny how a man will reveal himself without knowing it," he observed lazily. "What has she been doing to you, Carter, to give you 'that kid' in just that tone?"

"Too much to say," Carter replied shortly. "Too slangy and disrespectful. Butts into grown-up conversation, calls her mother old dear and tells her where to head in—she ain't too old to be spanked, and that's what she'd get if she were mine. I hate to see a kid like that rule the roost. Well, we'll be out of this in the morning, my long friend. I think you'll be able to do a little hiking."

"Hike—to Goldfield?" Bill was startled into trying to sit up, and found he couldn't very well. Carter leaned over and released him.

"Not just yet, Bill. I want to gather in the rest of the gang, and I expect to take you along with me; keep an eye on you—and besides, you can show me the trail."

"Like thunder I can!" Bill was frankly astonished. He studied Carter's amazing statement, covering the interval by fussing with his pipe. "Ever since I landed here," he said slowly, "I've been wondering if there was some kind of gang work going on, and trying to find out. I'm going to trust you, Carter—and that's quite a compliment, if you only knew it. Your speaking of gathering in the rest of the gang is, to say the least, enlightening; goes to show there is one, just as I thought. But there's also a complication, and that's where I'm going to trust you with the truth. It's like this, Carter:

"Marshall, as you probably know, is pretty much of a sot. I have been what you might call a volunteer in the fight to straighten him up, and that's what brought me into your clutches. Some one has been furnishing him with booze right along—and if you can show us where he gets it you'll be doing this family and me a tremendous favor. Of course he won't tell, but I'm satisfied that he doesn't know anything beyond the fact that he can get it from a certain source. I don't want you to involve him in your raid, on account of his family. I needn't tell you what fine people they are and how it would hurt them to have his name mixed up in any whisky deal. He isn't in on anything, I'm sure of that. For one thing, a gang of bootleggers or moonshiners—whichever they are—would be afraid to trust a man that is half balmy from drinking it. So if you'll give me your word that you'll lay off Marshall, and go after the source of his supply, I'll tell you all I know; little enough, worse luck."

"I thought you'd come through, give you time." Carter smiled enigmatically. "All right, Bill. To help you talk, I'll say that to date I haven't any particular evidence against Marshall himself, though I'm satisfied he's one of the bunch. I may turn up something against him, and in that case I can scarcely be expected to suppress the evidence even to save a nice family some humiliation. He's too sick to talk about it, anyway. I think that shock of thinking he'd killed you, and then finding he hadn't, rather bowled him over for the time being. He was drunk, of course. Crazy drunk. What did he have against you?" The last question he shot out abruptly, with a keen glance behind it.

"He caught me prowling around, hunting for his whisky cache, is the only thing I know of."

"Well, you found it—and made away with it."

Bill made no answer to that.

"You folks would show better sense if you didn't try to obstruct me in my work." Carter lighted a cigarette while he waited, but Bill seemed to have nothing more to say. "Well, you were going to tell me what you know about it. It's my duty to remind you that anything you say may be used against you, of course, also that I never yet compounded a felony or took hush money. With that understood I'd be glad to hear what you can tell me." He paused and added encouragingly, "I may say, too, that any help you give me in pulling in this bunch will be appreciated by the right people. It won't hurt you at all, and will probably help you a good deal."

Bill took a long pull at his pipe, opened his lips to let the smoke surge out into the dusk, reached up and packed the top pillow against the nape of his neck.

"On second thoughts, old man, I don't know a damn' thing," he drawled.

"That's your privilege, Mr. Morgan," Carter said quietly after a considerable silence. "You certainly must know what course you mean to take, but I do think you are making a blunder. What you could tell me might serve to clear Marshall of any complicity in the matter, if that's what you are aiming at."

Since he had some doubt of that very thing, Bill said nothing to that. He got up, stretching his arms and testing his shoulder muscles. A hike on the morrow did not appeal to him, and he meant to suggest that they both ride Hail and Farewell up the mountain. With a glance toward Carter for permission he went out and sat on the bench in the moonlight that whitened as night came on. That Carter followed and sat down beside him did not trouble Bill in the least. Carter was a man with a single purpose, that of being faithful at his task; Bill could respect a man like that, even though it might make his own position more awkward.

He wondered whether the girls would be permitted to know of the trip in advance. Joe's suggestion that he raise his voice in song did not strike him favorably, for two reasons. First, his singing voice was such that when Bill felt like warbling he usually went off somewhere by himself; the second reason was that he really knew very few songs, and Carter would probably wonder, if he did no worse, when Bill essayed to sing. Still, Joe and Barby ought to know what was coming.

He began to whistle then, in an absent-minded way, as if he were thinking of something afar off and was unconscious of the sound. The only thing he could think of that would convey any message whatever was that pensive strain, "There's a Long, Long Trail a Winding."

The moon swung high above the treetops of the young grove. A mocking bird sang somewhere beyond the silent house, and from the pond rose a chorus of impertinent young frogs. Bill's thoughts ranged far, returned to the incredible circumstance of his being under arrest, drifted to Marshall lying on the borderland of sanity, awoke to the fact that he was still whistling over and over the same broken bit of melody; wondered if the girls caught any meaning from it and would be able to benefit thereby. He did not see what they could do beyond shielding Marshall. If he were well enough they might get him out of the country while Carter was in the hills. Could he manage somehow to advise them to try it? He might extend Carter's trip by leading him off on a blind trail. Perhaps Carter would give him a few minutes alone with Barby, on the strength of that diamond engagement ring and Joe's outrageous declaration.

"We'll start before the girls are up," Carter observed cannily at that moment. "The sooner I wind this case up, the better, and the easier it will be for them—and you. We'll eat a camp breakfast, and take those two saddle horses down in the pasture." He turned his head and looked at Bill in the moonlight. "Marshall will be here when I get back. He's a sicker man than you've been to-day." He glanced toward the house, looked back again at Bill. "You still think you don't know anything about this affair?"

"Not a thing," said Bill coldly, and realized abruptly that after all he was telling the truth.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SHOT FROM THE CLIFF.

"SO this is where the ore came from, eh?" Carter stood on the Whistlerock dump and stared about him in the moonlight. His voice was lowered, as if he suspected listening ears concealed not so far away, and he stood close to Bill, with his hand in his coat pocket. "About what I expected, too. Now, where's the cabin? We'll go over there and proceed exactly as if it was Hank and you come back at last. Lead the way, Bill."

Bill picked up the reins of the brown horse and led the way to the cabin in the grove of pines. Carter had left the ranch at dawn, had followed Bill's guidance for two thirds of the way and had halted him then and waited for dusk before proceeding farther. Bill had been puzzled at first, but now he thought he understood why Carter had waited. He must suspect that the headquarters of the gang was near this mine.

They staked out the horses, returned to the cabin and started a fire. Bill looked for some sign that a stranger had been there in his absence, but Hank's general disorderliness discounted what evidence there might have been and he gave over the attempt. They ate a silent meal, and Carter rose.

"Leave the light burning, Bill. We'll go back to the mine. It's possible we may have visitors this evening, and I'd as soon be outside as in when they arrive." He stared at Bill while he made up his mind, then grimly got out the handcuffs.

With an impassive manner that must have exasperated Carter, Bill held out his hands, and with a grunt Carter shackled him. They walked down the narrow trail to the Whistlerock, Bill in the lead.

"I don't suppose you care to tell me how many I may expect to run across?" Carter inquired softly. "I don't insist—you have a right to throw the full burden of proof on my shoulders, of course. Still, I must repeat that I think you are making a big mistake by not talking a little."

"I'd talk," said Bill, "if I had anything to say. And I'd tell you how many men you could expect to see here, if I knew. I've never seen any, except Hank. And one night I got a glimpse of a man talking with Hank through the window. I might quote you and say that you're making a slight mistake yourself, Mr. Carter; though I wouldn't presume to tell a prohibition officer his business."

"You wouldn't? That's foolish, too. Because I'm not above taking advice. Here we are—no, don't go up on the dump. We'll stay here in the dark and I'll tell you what I had in mind to do. As you probably know, Hank went down after another packer, the output being too great for you to handle alone. I had an idea that I might be that packer, you see. Hank, we'll say, is sick and won't be at camp for a few days. If you agree to help me put this over, I'll turn your hands loose again, of course. Is it a bargain?"

Bill snorted.

"Far as I'm concerned, I promise not to attack you, and as for running away, I couldn't be hired to quit now. I'm curious to know how you are going to find a bunch of bootleggers by coming up here and packing ore off the mountain. Maybe you can make your plot hang together, but hanged if it doesn't look weak."

"Oh. You don't see how I'm going to do it, eh?"

"I do not, but I'm anxious to pick up a few pointers just the same. All you've done so far is put the handcuffs on me and take them off again. I could do that myself, if I had a key. I'd like to see a little action around here."

"I rather think you will," Carter said dryly. "If you'll just tell me how they handle it at this end, and about how many of them——"

"I must have lost the knack of making myself clear," drawled Bill. "That, or you weren't listening when I said I have never seen a soul up here except Hank. He worked here at the mine, getting out the ore, and I packed it down to the ranch. One man slipped up and had a talk with Hank through the window, the first night I spent here, but I couldn't get a line on who he was or what he wanted. That in itself was suspicious, of course. I took it to be some one who was hiding out and wanted grub, maybe."

"Is it possible," mused Carter under his breath, "that you are telling the straight truth? If I thought you didn't know what's been going on——" He stared out across the moon-splotched mountainside, and up at the grim escarpment above them from which the Whistlerock mine took its name. The night breeze in the pine tops whispered and sighed and covered well the murmur of their voices, and their position in deep shadow seemed to satisfy Carter that they were safe from observation or surprise. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, sighed and put it back.

"What was your opinion of Hank's activities up here, Bill? If you don't mind telling me. I'm willing to assume for the present that you really didn't know what was going on. Now, what I would like to get at is, how did this mining strike you? And what is your honest opinion of Hank?"

"I'm not a mining expert," Bill replied slowly. "It struck me as darned hard work, mostly. Hank says the ore is high in silver and gold, and he showed me what it looked like; brownish-yellow rock—rather heavy. He ought to know, but if he didn't he could probably fool me, easily enough. If it will help you, Carter, I will say that Hank seemed to be enjoying himself at my expense. I used to catch a leering look in the old fellow's eyes, as if he were putting something over on me. I didn't like it, but I never seemed able to catch him at anything."

"Well," Carter decided after mentally digesting this, "of course we must make allowances for your being a poet. I'd give a lot, Bill, to have had this packing job myself. Don't know anything about this work up here, except what Hank told you, eh? Ever hear of the Grape Vine Bottling Works? No? They have a plant on the other side of the mountains; make soft drinks, using water from a mineral spring over there. Ship in their fruit juices and bottles and kegs, claiming it's necessary to use the water right fresh from the spring, on account of certain volatile properties that are lost as the water stands. Might be right, too. Their soft drinks are very good; their *soft* drinks. Sure this isn't an old story to you?"

"Never heard of it."

"Well, some time ago a revenue officer called on them to check their output and make sure they weren't slipping up on their revenue stamps. Their tax returns didn't look right, somehow—that's out of my department. While he was prowling around he bumped into a man whose breath wasn't soft, by any means. That set him wondering if all the drinks were soft, and he tipped off our office. Know the rest of it?"

"No, but I'm listening as hard as I can, old man. I still don't see the connection between their bottled stuff and this." He nodded his head toward the ink-black portal of the incline shaft, and the sacked ore piled at one side of the dump.

"There's a link missing, I admit. Our investigators got on the job, and this is what they found—making it as brief as possible. Away back up a cañon, behind the bottling works, there's a mine. A dry camp, it is, and so they haul water from the works. I may say that there's a spring of pure water inside the fence which the works put up around their property, and they sell water to this mine at so much a barrel; few cents—doesn't matter. Well, we found that those water barrels held not water alone, but a lot of two-gallon wooden kegs. We know they go to this mine, but so far we can't catch 'em coming back. They get their supplies at Gold Center, but the trail is covered there. We've about concluded that they use a heap of sugar and corn meal for a camp that size, but there isn't a sign of anything coming *out*. Do you see what that means?"

"If you're sure the kegs went in, something must come out somewhere, I should say."

"Not over there, it doesn't, yet they're bottling whisky and slipping it out with their soft drinks. They have a picture of a bunch of grapes growing on a vine, for their trademark. Nice, purple grapes, natural as life. You'd think the variation in the coloring is the printer's fault, but we've discovered that the bottles of Grape Nectar carrying a certain off-color shade of grapes are really a very fair grade of corn whisky."

"I still fail to see the connection with this." Bill nodded toward the camp.

"You don't? I was in hopes you would, because that corn whisky comes out of the hills on this side and goes, by a roundabout way, to the Grape Vine Bottling Works. They've been clever enough to break the trail completely, at least twice that we know of. We know that empty kegs and other things—corn meal and sugar, mostly—go to that new mine back here in the hills, but it drops out of sight there. There isn't a drop of moonshine being made at the mine, and we've combed the hills around there—wherever there's water. By a process of elimination we know it's somewhere close to here. Hank let out enough to make me sure of it, and according to him, you are a most important link in the chain between still and bottles."

"They must know how to make me work in my sleep if they've been making a link out of me," Bill sighed. "I'm afraid Friend Hank was having fun with you."

"Ever see any one go under ether, Bill?" Carter chuckled. "They talk, as a rule. No sense to it, usually—aimless gabble, totally untrustworthy. But now and then —— Well, I was present when they sewed up Hank's head. I waited till he was pretty well under, but still fighting to keep from dropping off—you know how they act. When I thought the time was right I leaned over and said in his ear, 'Look out for that keg! What's the matter with it?' Hank gave a flop and a mumble and yelled out, 'Take it back and fill 'er *full!* You kin hear it sloshin'——' And then he cussed, and used your name quite plentifully, Bill. His opinion of Bill Woods wasn't pretty, but you know he thought it was you who hit him on the head."

"Fill it full—he could hear it slosh," Bill reflected aloud. "Can't see how that applies to me, Carter. Must have been just ether talk." He rose abruptly and walked straight out into the moonlight, making for the mine mouth.

Carter cursed him under his breath and followed. He too had left the shadow and was running in bright moonlight after Bill when he saw Bill pitch forward. On the heels of that came the thin pow-w of a rifle shot from the cliff. Carter hesitated in full stride, whirled and started back, when he too fell headlong, the second report following close.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT THE RANCH.

LYING in the one spare bed pulled close to the windows overlooking the grove and the pond—the screened sleeping place in the grove being inconvenient for good nursing—Marshall's closed eyelids shut in a soul sickened, staring at the stark ruin it had made of life. Thinking, thinking, thinking—when they thought him asleep or lying in the stupor of complete exhaustion. Exhausted he was, it is true. His body lay inert, too utterly tired to move. But the man himself was terribly alive, terribly just and with no mercy to soften his judgment of himself.

He heard murmurs in the next room, murmuring on the porch, whispered consultation and advice at his very bedside. The women wondered whether a doctor should be brought. His wife covered her dread of disclosure with thin optimism; he was resting—a doctor would order the very things they were doing for him; a light, nourishing diet, and complete rest. Joe agreed with her mother, fearing a doctor's diagnosis of her father's mental condition. Barby was sympathetic, helpless, glad to see the cheerful side of it if there was any comfort for her aunt. They decided to continue as they were unless some change showed for the worse. And on the evening of that second day, when he was roused for his supper of hot milk with an egg beaten in and a dust of nutmeg on top—Mrs. Marshall's favorite dish for invalids—he surprised her by holding the glass himself, swallowing the contents in a deep gulp or two, and setting the glass down with a gesture of decision.

"Bring the girls—and I want Bill," he said.

Mrs. Marshall felt her heart turn over in her chest. Families were assembled for deathbed scenes.

"Don't you feel—just right, dear?" She bent over him, a kind of terror in her eyes.

"Well enough. Well as I can expect. Call Bill, and the girls, Henrietta."

Henrietta moved toward the door, hesitated with her eyes wide and her lips parted, turned and left the room hurriedly. Marshall lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes like a man who is very, very tired but who is nevertheless determined to carry out the thing he has planned to do. Presently he heard flutters of thin dresses, the soft tread of careful feet. His eyes opened upon three apprehensive women who were looking at him anxiously, fairly holding their breath in the face of an unknown crisis. The ether about him seemed charged with their fear, and he shook his head impatiently while his glance roved swiftly around the room and through the open door.

"Where's Bill?"

"Bill?" Joe swallowed. "Bill went up the mountain; to the mine; with Carter."

"Who's Carter?"

"Don't you remember, daddy? The man who came out on the desert after us?"

Marshall shut his eyes, held the lids down for a moment, raised them suddenly. His tongue tip went swiftly along his lip, moistening the dryness; the trick of a drunkard.

"It's come—I thought perhaps that's why he came after us. Bill sent for him, I suppose. Well, it doesn't matter now. But I wanted Bill—Carter, too, since he's here—to listen to what I'm going to say. Means another telling, but no matter.

"Henrietta, and you girls, it's time I think that you should know the kind of a man I have been. I'm not dying, I'm sorry to say. Neither am I crazy, as you are probably thinking. I did make the attempt to end my life in the desert, decently, leaving behind me the supposition that I had lost my mind and wandered off. That plan was thwarted. I can only suppose, then, that God has decreed that I am to live and make atonement.

"How much you know or suspect, I can't say. However, I shall assume——" He broke off, moistened his lips again, looked away from them, out of the window. "I'm using platform words to stave off the ugly truth. Still weak, squirming—but the truth is this, Henrietta. I am not only a drunkard. I have fallen lower than that. The other night I attempted to murder Bill. Until I saw him in the desert I thought I had done so. I tried to murder him because I believed that he was a Federal officer, sent to watch me and to ferret out another crime of which I am guilty.

"For the sake of getting all the whisky I could drink, I have been aiding and abetting a system of moonshining and bootlegging the full extent of which I don't know. It must be a big thing, however. I did not share in the profits, except that I was to be kept supplied with whisky, delivered to me here at the ranch. It seemed to me a godsend—you women have no conception of what a craving for liquor is like." He looked at them, looked away again. "It's curious," he said half to himself. "Since I struck that blow I have had only a horror of drinking. I shall never touch it again under any circumstances. If not Bill, who was that man?" His eyes were upon his wife, demanding the truth.

Joe moved closer to her mother, slipped an arm around her waist.

"That was Hank, but he's all right. Mr. Carter took him to Goldfield that same night. Then he arrested Bill."

"Arrested—but Bill is an officer, I'm sure! He was searching the place for whisky, and I was afraid he would find it. Henrietta, unless it has been removed, that five-gallon canteen on the truck——"

"I poured that all out, daddy," Joe interrupted. "Carter thinks Bill got away with it, but I did it myself. I wish you would stop talking about it, daddy. Why worry mother with all this?"

"Worry me!" Mrs. Marshall took Joe's arm away and moved close to the bed, her eyes and lips hard. "Charles Marshall, I could curse the day I married you! All these years I've taken the brunt of your drunkenness—seen you drop down and down, tried to shield you from the contempt of the public. I've lied to my own child for you! I have covered up—smoothed things over—lied and smiled and made excuses for you, so that your own child might go on respecting you. I couldn't see you rob yourself of her love, I couldn't see her life spoiled as mine has been with your swinishness. I've tried to reform you. I've shut myself away from the things that make my life livable, just to help *you*—to shield you from temptation, make it easier for you to be a man! And what thanks? You lie there and calmly tell Joe and Barby the very things I've been trying to shield them from, in shame that Joe's father should be so low—so despicable a failure! My God, Charles, are you *boasting* that you tried to kill a man? I'll have you know that Bill, as you call him, is a famous man who wouldn't *look* at you on the street—and you tried to kill him, and then run off and die in the desert, pretending to be insane! A fine, cowardly thing to do! I've suffered a thousand deaths for you, Charles Marshall, but now I'm—I'm——"

"You're going to buck up and show whether you've got the real stuff in you, old dear!" Joe's clear young voice swept through the torrent of words as a clean wind sweeps through fog. "Excuse me for butting in, but you don't mean all that, you know. I tried to keep you from finding out about dad, but since you seem to know as much about it as I do, the thing to do now is to give him a hand."

"I'll give him nothing. What has he ever given me but trouble and disgrace? Ever since I married him, almost, I've fought to keep him from drinking and to keep people from despising him. Now he's completed the disgrace—a bootlegger, for the whisky he can drink!—an attempted suicide, an attempted murderer! Now, when he's dragged us in the mud, he——"

"Why, now he's going to do a comeback that we'll be proud of! And we're going to help, and glad to do it. Dad's got the stuff in him to put it over, now he's made up his own mind. That's a lot different, you know mother, from making up his mind for him."

Mrs. Marshall turned and looked at Joe with somber pity for her youth and ignorance.

"Oh, my child, you haven't had the broken promises and the deception to bear that I have borne. Your father—a sot and an attempted——"

"Say, listen, mother!" Joe's voice took

on an edge. "My father isn't going to find out that his daughter's a dud! Now's the very time to stand by and help him out, don't you see? We'd look nice, wouldn't we, turning him down now? What you do about your husband is your own affairs, I suppose—but it seems to me that when you married dad you let yourself in for a life's job, old dear. Why be a quitter now when there's something to work for? And don't think for a minute that I haven't known all about dad, ever since I was in kindergarten. I'm not so shocked as you may think, mother. I just knew that some day he'd wake up and really *want* us to rally round. If he had to bean Hank, in order to see where the trail was leading to, let's be thankful he didn't aim straight, and forget about it. And as for bootlegging—well, there's where we are going to get busy and protect him if possible. Anyway, he's too sick to go to jail—aren't you, dad? And it'll be just a fine, probably, and I'd be tickled foolish to sell some of my birthday pearls to help out."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Mrs. Marshall began, and looked at Marshall with the beginning of tears in her eyes. "Oh!" The sound was a wailing cry of surrender, of shame for her brief rebellion. She went down on her knees beside the bed. "Charles—Charles—if only you mean it—I'll be the happiest woman on earth!"

Marshall reached out a fumbling hand to her head, but his eyes went to Joe with a wondering look which Joe met with a smile held steady by sheer will power while her eyes brimmed with tears.

"I always said parents are a great responsibility," she declared shakily, and blew her dad a kiss. "Come on, Barb. The young lovers want to be alone. And besides, the dishes aren't washed yet."

CHAPTER XXX.

WHISTLEROCK.

"CARTER?" Bill breathed the word in a tone that would not have carried thirty feet.

A stifled sound came from the edge of the dump; a sound like a groan cut short in the beginning.

"Carter, are you hurt?"

"Not much—shoulder hit. You damned fool! Are you all right?"

"Sorry, old man. Didn't think you'd follow me. Think they'll come down to investigate?"

"Fools if they don't," grunted Carter, keeping his voice down. "May watch to see if we move. Pump a few more into us if we do. Are you hurt?"

"No-o—but I never disliked handcuffs more than I do this minute."

"Too bad," growled Carter. "But if I come over there they'll plug me, sure. Once is aplenty."

"Can't you walk like a snake? One wiggle at a time—it counts up quicker than you'd think. I worked it out in a story, not long ago. Fellow made fifty yards in a little while. Just keep your body flat as you can and—you're lying almost broadside to me. That's fine. You can move sidewise. If you make an inch or two, let me know and I'll make an inch or two. Don't talk, old man. You can't murmur like the wind in the pine tops—guess you never made love at a picnic—or talked secrets at a reception."

"Making a speech?" Carter retorted with sarcasm.

"Merely mingling my voice with the pines. Whistlerock was well named, for there are murmurs and whistlings up here—many a night I sat and tried to fit words to them. Comes in handy now. Listen how I'm imitating 'em."

"By golly, you are," Carter muttered admiringly. It was really surprising, now he gave his attention to it, how Bill's voice blended with the blurred humming of the wind overhead. It had quite lost that vibrant quality that cuts through lesser vibrations and carries above the small noises of the wild. Privately Carter promised himself that if he ever got out of this scrape he would learn to pitch his voice in harmony with his surroundings. A useful accomplishment.

"Tell me, how is the snake's progress?"

"Made a foot or so."

"Easy, old man. Keep your ears open. If you hear them coming—you will, for it's all rocks, above here—get up and make a run for it. Here. We'll hole up in the mine."

"All right—but that ain't poet talk, Bill. That's outlaw."

"Well, I've dodged many a posse—on the typewriter."

"Good safe place!" grunted Carter, stifling another groan.

"Carter?" There had been a silence that seemed long.

Carter groaned, and Bill heard a feeble stirring, as if the wounded man were trying to lift himself along.

"Can you throw that key over here, Carter?"

"I—dunno. Hit my—shoulder. Put me —out for a minute."

"Toss the key over here. Hurry up. Don't wait."

Silence, hard to endure. Then a muttered warning, a clink of metal on the rocks. Not close enough—not nearly close enough for a man whose hands must move together or not at all. Bill hitched himself along slowly, inch by inch as he had advised Carter to do. It was risky, in that white moonlight. He had marked with his full attention the spot where the key had fallen and he kept his eye on the place. He would have to turn on his side, get his manacled hands in a certain position. He would have given much for one free hand that could reach out stealthily, fingers groping for the key. It seemed to him that a full hour dragged by while he was working his body slowly toward the key—yet the moon stood still in that clear space in the sky, the shadows had not lengthened. Carter was lying still.

From somewhere up on Whistlerock cliff Bill heard a voice. An oath or two, cut short. He could not be sure, but it seemed to him that whoever was up there was coming down; which seemed unreasonable, too, when he remembered how, even in broad daylight, the cliff showed a perpendicular wall. His two hands moved out from his body, searching blindly for the key. Until he had that he was practically helpless, and so was Carter.

"Damn' good shootin'," a voice stated satisfiedly, closer than was comfortable for Bill. "Croaked 'em both."

"Don't rush up too quick!" another voice admonished. "If there's any more they're stallin' off, waitin' fer us t' do that."

"There ain't any more. Jest them two."

"Anyway, they'll keep, I reckon."

Bill's little finger touched metal. He felt carefully, got the key and discovered that freeing himself was not so simple a matter. A minute was gone before he had learned the trick of holding the key just so between thumb and finger, but he managed it and slipped the manacles into his pocket before he gathered himself together cautiously and looked at Carter.

Twice his length away, Carter was lying motionless, one arm straight down by his side, the other crooked above his head. Even at that short distance he had a lifeless look. Bill mentally measured the seconds it would cost him to get up, rush back, pick up Carter and run to the mine mouth. If he were quick enough he might accomplish half of the feat before those who watched recovered from their surprise. Yet it had not taken them long to shoot when he had darted out of the shadow; nor to fire again at Carter. The hum of the bullet that had warned him to drop was no more than two or three seconds ahead of Carter's fall. It appeared that the two above him were in no hurry to approach closer to the dump. They were waiting to see if more would walk out of the shadows. Bill remembered something and began to send questing glances up from under his eyebrows. There had been a lot of baling wire for use in fastening the mouths of the ore sacks. His eyes gleamed when they discovered a loose bundle just beyond him.

"Car'er-ol'man——" Bill's voice might have been the wind droning through the rocks. Certainly it sounded little like human speech, but a faint sound answered him. Carter also must have heard that bit of dialogue up among the rocks.

"You-hol'-wire—I pul-l——"

Carter's fingers closed upon the wire loop that touched his hand. How many anxious minutes had been spent in pushing the wire to the point of contact with Carter's hand, Bill never attempted to guess, but he knew that his face was beaded with perspiration before he had accomplished what he set out to do.

It was slow, ticklish work. His hope lay in the probability that their enemies were not gluing their eyes to what appeared to be two dead bodies, but would be watching the grove for some sign that would betray the presence of others as yet unseen. He guessed that their eyes would instinctively avoid those two bodies, once they were satisfied that both were down to stay. Wherefore Bill wormed forward in the moonlight, advancing a few inches and then waiting while he dragged Carter a like distance. It was not easy. Carter was a heavy man, and with one shoulder and arm useless he could not help Bill, except that he could hang grimly to the loop that cut painfully into his fingers when the full weight of his body came on them with a jerk. It was cruelly hard work for both.

Bill had brought Carter up to the point where he himself had lain. He had got to his feet, safe in the shelter of the incline portal, when he heard a startled exclamation among the rocks. An oath followed, and there was the sound of men scrambling hastily over boulders. Bill dropped the wire, darted out into the open, caught Carter just under the arms and darted back, flinching violently at the last, when the rifle spoke again. But he laid Carter down well within the incline and laughed aloud while he felt for the officer's gun.

"Hear 'em? They missed one body. Too late, though. That wire trick fooled them. Where are your extra shells?"

"Pocket," grunted Carter feebly, showing that although he was helpless his mind was on the job. "Hurt?"

"No. Dodged that shot. We're safe, in here. They can't hit us, shooting straight in, on account of the downward slant. I had that in mind. They'll have to come right up and shoot down at us, Carter—and I'll take care of any one who tries that stunt! Fine, safe burrow, this. Can I do anything for you, old man?"

"Stop the bleeding—if you can. It's that makes me so damn' weak."

One eye on the mine mouth, one ear cocked for the sound of footsteps, Bill pulled off his shirt and made some sort of bandage. Now, all at once it seemed, the light was fading outside as the moon slid farther and farther down the sky. He hurried, but with only his sense of touch to guide his ministrations he was awkward at best, and it did not help him much when Carter fainted and went limp in his arms as he lifted to place the bandage under his shoulder. Nor did it help to feel a bullet hole in his own leg and the warm trickle of blood stealing down into his sock.

Crouched within the black shade of the incline, his eyes peering over the lip of the portal under the crude windlass which Hank had lately fashioned when the vein dipped nearly vertical, Bill waited. His crude dressing seemed to have checked the bleeding of Carter's wound, for presently that individual pulled himself into a half-sitting position and feebly remarked that he would give a dollar for a drink of water.

"There's water in the bottom of this burrow," Bill told him equably. "If you can wait till daylight I'll get some. Think you can manage?"

"I think so," Carter replied in the tone that went with the twisted smile; which served to ease Bill's mind considerably. He could not be sure, but he thought he had heard some one moving just beyond the dump and he wanted above all things to guard against a surprise. The sound came again and he moved uneasily.

"Inside my shirt there's a flash light," said Carter, interpreting Bill's movement according to his experience. "One of those long-distance kind. Better focus it down the shaft—here it is. Turn the bottom till it's right—you know, don't you? Spray it around, out there—and be ready to shoot at anything you see. Can't let 'em come up close."

The sudden brilliance revealed a man's head appearing over the top of the dump, and Bill fired at it without any compunction whatever. It seemed to him that the head disappeared too abruptly to have been pulled back to safety, but that was only a guess. He swept the light farther and took a chance shot at a figure just dodging behind a pine tree. From that tree came a shot that threw dust in Bill's face and he shut off the light involuntarily and withdrew for the time being.

"Well, they know we aren't dead in here," he observed complacently. "I saw only two. Would that be all, do you think?"

"All that's needed over here, besides you and Hank," Carter grunted. "Think I'd come alone after more than a couple of men?" Carter's shoulder was aching frightfully and his throat was parched, but the thing that irked him most was the necessity of lying back while Bill did his fighting for him. Seeking the protection of a prisoner was a new and unpleasant experience for Carter, and his temper suffered.

"Some of those ore sacks wouldn't make a bad barricade," Bill suggested when some minutes had passed without further incident. "They're piled close—think I'd better pull two or three over here?"

When Carter merely grunted, Bill swept the dump and the grove once more with the light, saw nothing and crept painfully out to where he could lay hold of a sack. It was all well enough to lie snug below the lip of the portal, but he thought he could lie snugger behind a barricade when daylight came; the enemy would then be compelled to venture close to the portal before shooting, unless they blazed blindly away at the ore itself.

His leg pained him considerably, but he knew that it would probably feel worse later on, so he persisted at his volunteer job, counting on the irregularity of his illumination to keep the fellows under cover. They must have heard him pulling the sacks of ore into position, but one random shot was the only sign they gave of being still in the vicinity.

"How many sacks of ore have you got piled out there, Bill?" Carter asked when Bill had piled the fifth sack in the opening.

"If it's important I'll try and count them," drawled Bill. "Hank's been busy as a honey bee since I packed the last load, for there must be fifteen or twenty sacks all ready to ship."

"Worth protecting, eh? Why not build your barricade outside so you can see both sides as well as in front? Those fellows are still on hand, aren't they?"

"They seem to be."

"Then they'll probably stay. Figure on starving us out, most likely. May do it, too—unless you can pick them off." He was silent for a bit. Then, "Damn this shoulder!" he gritted resentfully. "First time I was ever put out of the game."

Bill did not answer. He had turned the light on the grove, and while Carter was speaking he fired at a moving figure; missed and fired again.

"Hitting anything?" Carter inquired restlessly. "Or are you trying to scare 'em to death? My God, I thought poets could *talk!*"

"You're doing all right, old man. Go on. I can talk when you're asleep."

Carter swore and remarked that if he were looking after a wounded man he'd have gumption enough to get a cigarette and light it for him. So presently, Bill having taken the hint, he was finding what solace he could in a smoke.

Bill was hungry for his pipe, but he was obliged to forgo the comfort of it until such time as his hands were not more than full of other more vital matters. He risked being shot while he pulled the sacks of ore forward, silently conceding that Carter's suggestion was a good one. He even managed to drag a ragged square of canvas over the peeled-pine windlass, which would later screen them from both sun and enemy eyes. How long they would be held there he did not care to guess. Others might come to strengthen the siege, for one watcher at a time would be sufficient to hold them prisoner there, while Carter's wound made escape impossible. Bill considered attempting to steal out before daylight in the hope of reaching the ranch and getting help there, but he gave up the notion when he realized that Carter would not be able to hold the fort alone.

Long before daylight he had completed the shifting of the sacked ore and was ready to drop from weariness. Carter had dozed uneasily, muttering in his sleep. The spiteful bark of the rifle outside roused him and set Bill to peering anxiously into the grove, ready to retaliate. But he was too late to locate the source of the bullet that spatted into the windlass over his head.

"Lord, but I'm dry!" groaned Carter.

"Lo, the rosy morn approacheth, old man. If you can manage to hold this gun and take a shot if necessary, I'll see about the water supply. I can't use the light because I'm going to take out the battery and use the case for a drinking cup. Can you handle the gun for a minute?"

There was not much water to be had, but Bill did not tell Carter that. A slow seepage through a seam in the limerock yielded a pint or more in a hollow that Hank had gouged out with his pick, probably in the expectation of having at hand water for drilling. Little enough, but much better than none at all, Bill thought as he carried the flash-light case nearly full to Carter. Their wounds must go unbathed and untended; enough that they need not suffer the full torture of thirst.

Full morning showed a quiet grove, except that the birds and chipmunks were busy with their housekeeping. Carter openly mourned because Bill had not been able to shoot down the men who had them bottled in the mine. Murder looked desirable and altogether praiseworthy just then to Carter.

Bill eased his wounded leg into a less painful position and wondered how long they could hold out, and whether he must actually buy their release with those two misguided souls out there. Now that the proposition confronted him as the only alternative to losing his own life and Carter's, killing a man in the hills lost all its picturesque quality of adventure. Had all his fictional killings been merely a sordid trading of this life for that? This was, he supposed, an adventure of the kind he had woven into stories and sold. It held all the qualities he had deemed necessary to red-blooded fiction. But somehow, reality lacked the thrill he had always fancied it contained. It was nothing more nor less than a mean combination of hunger, thirst, the pain of torn thigh muscles and a poignant anxiety over the outcome; that, and the probability that he would end the day by having murdered a man because it was to his interest to do so. Unless, of course, he himself was killed.

While the hours dragged to noon and then to dusk, Bill's thoughts dragged round and round the dilemma and found neither hope nor any zest therein; perhaps because the watchers in the grove contented themselves with keeping themselves out of sight and sending an occasional shot toward the barricade as a reminder of their presence. Red-eyed with loss of sleep, Bill watched and waited and never succeeded in getting a glimpse of them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CAVE'S SECRET.

JOE banged the screen door behind her and knocked a chair over in her headlong rush across the dining room, but she reached her father's room with her full power of speech intact.

"Dad Marshall, something's got to be done about Bill and that officer! Do you know where they are, this minute? Holed up in your mine, while a couple of men shoot at them every few minutes. Lobo and I sneaked up there by the short cut to see what was going on and why they didn't come on back, and that's the kind of party we ran into. My word! That man Carter must be an awful smear, to get himself and Bill into a hole like that!"

"Two men, you say? Did they see you, Josephine?"

"Two men, and they did not. One had a rag tied around his head, and they were both standing behind trees and watching the mine. Lobo was getting all ready to bark or something, but I felt his hair begin to rise up on his neck, so I cuffed him and shut him up. One man had a rifle and he took a rest against the tree and shot—with the most diabolical deliberation imaginable! Shall I take a gun and——"

"No!" Marshall's hands went white-knuckled on the arms of the big rocking-chair where he was sitting by the window. "Get in the car, Josephine, and go after Nelson. Tell him to drop everything and come at once, and bring his rifle with him."

"Never thought of Nelson!" Joe exclaimed in a tone of relief. Once more the screen door banged shut behind her, and in another minute or so the touring car went roaring up through the grove on the road to Nelson's shack. At that rate Nelson would be on the trail in less than fifteen minutes.

As a matter of fact, Joe had him in the dining room just twelve minutes from the time she had left it, and she threw open the door to her father's room and cried, "He's here, daddy!" before Nelson had remembered to take off his hat in the house. Joe stood staring. Her father's light bath robe which he had worn a few minutes ago lay just as he had dropped it off in the middle of the floor, and the owner was gone. Joe rushed to the wide porch and did not see him. She turned a bit pale as a certain thought edged into her mind, but she pushed it back and turned to Nelson, her eyes hard.

"Daddy's gone—again. But we can't wait to hunt him up now. He couldn't do anything, anyway. Wait till I get my shotgun and we'll start. I'll show you the way. And Nelse, I won't have time to talk when we start up the hill, so I'll tell you now that you will have to shoot when you get there. They're outlaws, remember—for they're trying to kill an officer."

"I know," Nelson replied with a stolid calm that was the best tonic in the world just then. "I bet I shoot, all right! I don't ask no questions!"

In the yard they met Mrs. Marshall, who looked with surprise and some consternation at their haste, armed as they both were.

"It's Bill and Carter, up at the mine, fighting bootleggers. We're going to help. Mother, dad's gone off somewhere again, and you better see if you can find him. We'll be back soon as we get things settled up there. Don't worry!" With Lobo on the leash she disappeared among the rocks that abutted on the stable and corral, Nelson at her heels.

"'Don't worry!'" muttered Mrs. Marshall, making her way with blind, stumbling steps to the house. "May the Lord have mercy on this family! Charles will be next—nothing on earth can save him if his gang has taken to fighting. My poor baby!"

Her poor baby was setting Nelson a terrific pace up the mountainside in spite of the fact that this was her second trip. As on another eventful trip, Lobo strained at the leash and pulled Joe along with him, thus taking half the labor of climbing. Nelson had good, sturdy legs, but they had been trained to following the plow and the steepness of the blind, rocky trail soon had him puffing so audibly that Joe felt constrained to halt at the first level until he had got his wind.

"It isn't more than a mile, straight up this way," she heartened him. "I don't suppose they dream that I know the way, and have been up here more than once. The trail goes away around. When I look back and shake my head at you, Nelse, stop puffing and grunting if it kills you. We'll be close, and our only hope is to take them by surprise. Besides, you'll need steady nerves for it. We've simply got to bluff them off."

"I don't bluff nobody. I shoot."

Joe looked at him, his heavy face crimson with the climb, sweat-streaked, grim. A burly man, sober-minded, phlegmatically bent on carrying through whatever he undertook. She turned and went on, Lobo forging ahead with his nose to the ground. They heard shooting, and Nelson gripped his rifle tighter, his jaws clamped together.

Joe signaled Nelson into caution as the little meadow came into sight, some distance to the right of them. The two horses were stepping uneasily around in their close-cropped circle, the picket ropes worn smooth and hard from dragging over the mountain sod. They spied the two and nickered wistfully, but Joe edged away to the left, going carefully through the timber, the dog's leash shortened so that her hand could grasp his collar and quiet him.

Two shots, rather close together. Nelson lifted his rifle, glancing down while he released the safety with his thumb. He brushed past Joe, walking with legs half bent, rifle raised and ready to aim. He might have been stalking a deer or a covey of mountain quail. Joe shivered as she watched him, turned her back and shut her eyes against the thing that must be coming next. At her feet Lobo crouched, grinning, alert, a faint rumbling under the lifted hair on his throat.

Nelson lifted his rifle, aimed, lowered it slowly, made as if to raise it again. He stood so, poised, watching. Then quite suddenly he fired—twice. Joe gave another violent shudder and went down, burying her face in Lobo's neck very much as she had done on the desert. Lobo winced when she touched the healing wound on his head, perked his ears toward the mine and gave a short bark.

"Hey! Almost I shoot you, Mr. Marshall!" Nelson's voice boomed with cheerful resonance. "I don't know you are coming up here also. That all?" The last two words plainly showed how his mind had veered to another matter.

"I think so," Marshall's voice replied nervously. "You did it very quickly, Nelson. I—yes, I came ahead, since it seemed to me that the matter was urgent. I—er—just arrived ahead of you. I suppose——" Joe did not hear what more her father had to say, for he was leading the way to the mine, and besides, his voice was lowered.

Just within the portal Bill was staring stupidly down at the aromatic trickle which seeped from under the barricade. Carter, propped against the wall, was eying him with a curious intentness. Bill looked up, met his steady stare and pulled his lips to a mirthless grin.

"Whistlerock ore has sprung a leak somewhere," he observed gravely. "So that's what they call 'high grade,' is it?"

"That's what you've been packing out of here, Bill. I've been wondering all along whether you're a darn good actor or whether you didn't know. If it's acting you deserve to get by with it. You're not under arrest any longer, you know."

"That's fine," gloomed Bill. "Maybe it'll help some at the pearly gates. You know they've got reënforcements out there, don't you?"

"Thought I heard different guns. Well, I guess——"

Bill whirled—slowly, because he was very stiff and sore—and thrust the muzzle of his gun fairly into Marshall's face before he saw who he was. That was the first inkling they had of any relief at hand. Even then Bill was not so sure, until Lobo bounded across the dump with Joe, bareheaded, close behind.

And all the while, from a bullet-punctured keg of whisky in the center of a sack of ore, that telltale stream trickled out, smelling to high heaven and a westering sun.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JOE GOES HOME.

MARSHALL, looking rather white around the mouth, helped Nelson place two canvas-wrapped bodies in the back of the truck and returned heavy-footed to the bunk house where Carter and Bill were absorbing what comfort was to be had in two beds, all the food they could swallow, and a heavenly safety from immediate peril.

"I—if you will permit me to offer a suggestion," Marshall began in his nervous way, "I would think it a good idea to let me drive the touring car in. I—would prefer not to drive the truck. I——"

"Nelson's going to drive the truck," Carter stated calmly. "Good man, Nelson. Good shot, too. He saved a lot of trouble."

Marshall winced and looked away, moistening his lips.

"Then I suppose I may drive——"

"Bill's arms aren't crippled," Carter interrupted again. "No reason why he shouldn't drive, I guess. Road's pretty good, and we'll take my car. His left leg's all right."

"Of course you understand that I—I shall make no attempt——" He swallowed. "I shall not attempt to escape, Mr. Carter."

"Escape what?" Carter twisted his lips. "They don't call it a crime to *drink* moonshine, Mr. Marshall. Nor to—er—shoot in defense of an officer of the law. No, I'm afraid I haven't any use for you this time. I'm afraid your excitement is all over, and you'll have to content yourself with looking after your family." He drew a mouthful of smoke thoughtfully, looked at his cigarette and wiped off a bit of ash. "If you could manage somehow to find that still, and keep an eye on that whisky they hid in your ore, Mr. Marshall, the government will be very much obliged to you. In fact, I'm going to deputize you to take charge of things here. You and the little girl and that dog ought to be able to hold forth in that cabin up there, if necessary, until my partner, Williams, can get down here from Goldfield. Would you mind staying up there on guard for a day or so, Mr. Marshall?

"I don't think there's a chance in the world that any one will come over from the Gold Center gang, but in case they do you may have a bit of work to do. I advise pushing those sacks of camouflaged kegs down into the shaft, taking some kind of a camp outfit and camping right there where Bill and I held forth. No one would be apt to know what had become of these two that—er—Chris got; at least, not before Williams can get on the job with his men. We've got to take these bodies in to-night, and the sooner Bill and I get to a doctor the better, so I don't see but what you'll have to manage. I thought, with that game kid and her dog——"

"You could turn the whole thing over to the kid and forget about it!" Bill exclaimed with emphasis. Just as well to give Marshall a minute or two, he thought. "I'd back Joe to handle the whole gang if she happened to run into them. You'll maybe have a chance, Mr. Marshall, to get back at the fellows who helped themselves to your ore for a blind. It's a moral certainty that the buyers were more anxious to get those kegs than they were the silver in the ore. But you'll have the last laugh—am I right, Carter?"

"You are, Bill." Carter was very busy, studying his cigarette. "But Mr. Marshall isn't the first man made to look foolish by a gang of their stripe. Moonshiners and bootleggers," he added gravely, "make it a point to use perfectly innocent people whenever it's possible. They may even try to lay the blame on the men they use in that way, if they get in a corner. But we're hard to fool, if I do say it. Take Williams, for instance. He's a wise bird if ever there was one."

"I—you can depend on me, Mr. Carter." Marshall stood up, his whole person giving an intangible impression of a mental squaring of shoulders. "I've been a knave and a fool, and worse. Whisky had me down—so low down that I attempted your life, Bill, the other night. Mr. Carter, it is only right that you should know I am the man who struck old Hank. I mistook him for Bill, whom I had caught trying to find my whisky. I——"

"Yes, well-l—no use wasting time on

trifles. If Bill didn't deserve a rap on the head, Hank certainly did. And remember this, Mr. Marshall. If you were the only man in the country who was a slave to drink, Volstead would never have been heard of outside his own district! And I never knew of a case," he grinned humorously, "where whisky made a man any better! I hear you've cut it out. All I can say is, I wish every booze fighter in the country could be cured by giving him a good hefty wrench and turning him loose on a moonshiner. It would soon put us officers out of a job, but we wouldn't grudge that. Speaking unofficially, Mr. Marshall, I want to thank you for that blow. I couldn't have asked for a prettier situation than the one I walked into, helping old Hank get to Goldfield; simplified my round-up considerably and saved a lot of mistakes all around. Now, if you'll just call us in a couple of hours, Mr. Marshall, Bill and I will take a nap and be ready to start."

Marshall went out, looking dazed. Carter waited until he was well outside, then looked across at Bill and lowered an eyelid.

"Aside from enjoying myself," as Joe puts it, "knowing a man like you is worth the trip over here," Bill said softly after a silence.

"Oh, thunder!" grunted Carter. "That's the trouble with a poet—he's so darned sentimental."

"Yes, Mr. Williams," Joe observed in what Bill would have called a funny, grown-up, prim voice, "my dog found the camp where they had been making liquor, but my father thought we had better not go up there until you arrived. He didn't know just what course you might want to take."

Williams, a man of nearly Bill's height, but thinner than Bill, thanked her politely and suggested that she show him the spot. Which Joe, with the ubiquitous Lobo trotting ahead, proceeded to do.

From the Whistlerock mine a deep, water-worn gully ran up toward the cliff. Joe took Williams and his men up that, to a place where the cliff jutted out in what was apparently an unbroken bulge in the wall, but which actually concealed a fissure behind it, as if the bulge had been caused by a split in the rock. This was as far as Joe had gone, she said.

That the camp was near, the odor of souring mash testified. Moreover, a rope sling hung down from the top of the fissure. Without a doubt the kegs of whisky had been lowered from the cliff, then carried down to the mine to be packed in the ore. Williams gave one glance and went up, followed closely by his men; a hard scramble, too, though not sufficient to daunt Joe who wanted much to see what a still looked like—and perhaps to make sure there would be nothing to point a finger at her daddy. She may even have made a surreptitious investigation on the day of her discovery and thought it best to fib about it.

An ideal spot for such purpose, Williams declared. There was ample room, back under the overhanging rock. The cliff went on up, another fifty feet or so, with the most precarious trail of all from ledge to top; so precarious that a rope was necessary there also. And from the ledge one could lie flat and see the cabin, the mine, the little meadow—all within rifle shot. There was a small spring, too, back under the wall, where the mash was going bad in barrels and the flies were holding drunken revel.

"Too bad," said Williams, "that Friend Carter missed this find. Look at that still, would you! Ever see a classier outfit, Bob? Hundred-gallon, run with a gasoline stove —away out here! That's to get away from showing a smoke, up here. Well, if the little girl will stand over here, you can take pictures of the camp, Bob, and then you and Elkins better climb up and take the trail back, and see where they got their stuff from. That rope's for letting stuff up and down—we'll send up a couple of canteens. Don't spend too much time, but make it back here before dark. Guess you can stay here, all right. Seems to be everything you'll need. We'll camp down at the cabin to-night. This is a two-man outfit, all right. Then to-morrow we'll move the stuff."

Joe, standing a little apart with the dog on guard before her, lifted her head.

"You aren't going to—to spoil everything, are you, Mr. Williams, before Mr. Carter and—and Bill come back? Bill's an author, and I know this would give him lots of ideas."

"Bill? Morgan? They aren't coming back, kid. Carter's shoulder needed an X ray, and Morgan's leg showed infection, and so they're in Los Angeles in a hospital. Frisco was closer, but Morgan asked to be sent to Los, so they went together. No, they aren't coming back."

"Oh," Joe's voice was very faint and dull. "I think my father wants me, Mr. Williams. If you're through with us, I think we'll go—home."

"Oh, sure. " Williams smiled negligently. "Good kid, to save us all the trouble of finding this. Send you something nice when I get back—— Oh, Bob! Might get a picture looking down——"

Joe settled her hat on her head, spoke to Lobo and grasped the rope that made the fissure passable.

"Here, wait! Better let me help you, little girl. You might fall."

"Thank you," said Joe, "but I'm not the falling kind!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

JOE AGAIN.

WOODS MORGAN, fresh from a thoroughly authorish sojourn at Del Monte, where he managed to extract some real thrills and a narrow escape from a broken neck in the polo game there, walked once more into the path of destiny. On the surface of that afternoon he was strolling down to a street corner, meaning to catch the next downtown car, when he met the club president who begins this story. The club president wore a new gown and a becoming fall hat and a new fur and she was on her way to the first real worth-while meeting of the season.

"I know you are an answer to the prayer of a distracted woman, Mr. Morgan," she declared in her convincing way. "Here I was hoping and *praying* that something would happen to save my program this afternoon. You know Jarvis Middleton? Half an hour ago he telephoned that he can't possibly come; broke a rib—he *says*—and can't get around at all. I've heard before that he's tricky, that way. Well, that leaves me flat, of course. There'll be some good music, and a clever talk on kindergarten stories, and if you'll just show your face to the crowd and recite or read or do *anything*—seeing you are an answer to prayer?"

Woods looked down into her trustful brown eyes and weakened.

"Far be it from me to doubt the Lord's judgment," he said, "but are you sure you interpret the answer correctly? I've been out of the game for months, you know; haven't a rhyme in my head. I've a bad conscience over an unfilled contract, a limp I got in the desert——"

"That's exactly what the good Lord was thinking of when he dropped me off at this corner, because I missed the Pico car! A limp that you got in the desert—my word! what more could a club ask for than to hear all about it? There'll be some who know the desert and appreciate the adventure—come right along, it's the Lord's will. You can't go beyond that."

Should he? Woods hated to stand up and talk to a crowd of women, but—oh, well, the president had a way with her, and he went right along, his long legs accustoming themselves to her short, eager steps. They were late, and Woods was glad to see the president pounced upon and borne away to the platform before she could do more than send him an apologetic smile and nod toward a seat well up in front, close to the platform and the piano and a demure young woman whose back was turned toward him but whose wavy hair, with a live shine to it, gave him a sudden homesick pang. He wished women would stop using brilliantine to make their hair look glossy.. He wouldn't sit there at all. He would find himself a seat farther back, next the wall, where he needn't meet the seeking, smiling eyes of the women who recognized him with flutters of pleased excitement. So he sat by the wall and waited to be bored until such time as he could retaliate by boring others. What he would say when the time came, Woods didn't know. Give them a lot of hot air about sunsets or something —he'd be darned if he told how he got his limp! Why, if he were to tell——

All through the opening formalities and the first piano number Woods thought of the things he certainly would not tell to these women. About old Hank, and Barby and the adventure of the ring that failed to pan out a romance but went flat, and the cook who died of apoplexy from drinking moonshine on a hot day, and Marshall and his—— No, no, he could *not* tell the only real story he had ever lived in his life. And Joe—he could still see the top of that girl's head, and her hair *was* like Joe's; had that same silky, alive look—Joe, and her funny, slangy talk and her dog. A kid a man could just about worship, when she grew up and put on a bit of dignity and poise—by Jove! Joe had poise enough as it was! Come to think of it, he had never seen her flustered, all the time he was there.

A game kid, with a good deal of depth. He believed he'd take a run over there. He needed his typewriter, anyway, and he ought to make some arrangements about Hail and Farewell; couldn't leave those horses eating up the Marshall meadows without so much as a by your leave. Maybe Joe would like to have Hail. Well, he supposed she would be in school, by now. October—of course she would be back in school. On second thoughts, Woods decided that he could write and make arrangements for the horses, and have his machine shipped to him.

Woods came out of his abstraction with a start that made the women nearest him jump, and look to see what had happened. What brought him back to his surroundings was a certain tone in a certain voice. The program had progressed to the point where the first speaker was beginning her talk, and it was that which sent a crimple up the back of Woods' neck, and gave his heart a pinch. It was the young woman with hair like Joe's, and she was saying:

"I called this talk, 'Literature For Little Tots' partly because I liked the jingle of it, but mostly because the little tots do need a literature of their own. You don't know it, I suppose, but those of us who teach the tots are still telling the same old jingly things that were invented to amuse King Tut's great-grandmother when she was little. Or else we have to invent stories and jingles of our own. I've invented so many that I can't tell whether I'm an author or a kindergarten teacher; only I know I'm not an author, because——"

Joe! Little Joe Marshall! It couldn't be—but it was. Standing there secure in her subject, with the soft shine in her hair and the clear, terribly direct light in her eyes and with the soft curve from chin to chest—it was Joe, all right; no mistake. But what staggered Woods was the miracle of her growing up in a little over three months, from a slim, irrepressible tomboy of no more than fifteen at the most, to a young woman who could talk calmly of the problem of kindergarten teaching. Eighteen? Nineteen? Woods could only guess rather wildly, and wonder at the thrill it gave him to see her, to listen to her voice.

If he had thought romantically of either girl, it was Barby who had figured intermittently in his thoughts. And that was queer, now he considered it. He had always been rather expecting to fall in love with Barby—and he had never quite come to the point of feeling more than a sentimental interest in her. Even that interest had been intrigued because of the episode of the ring, he now saw very clearly. And here was Joe —— Well, Woods suddenly found himself swept off his mental feet. He didn't know what to think about it. All he knew was that that funny, thrilly feeling hit him at certain tones in her voice, or when he looked particularly at her hair or the curve of her throat.

Woods hadn't much of an idea what Joe talked about, nor what he talked about later. He was so busy listening to Joe's voice and thinking about her that he lost her words or heard them vaguely. And he was so busy wondering what Joe thought about seeing *him* there, that he talked with only a fraction of his mental self on the job. He must have talked rather well, however, since he was applauded frequently and smiled upon and thanked afterward. He did not come to himself, really, with his whole mind and heart and soul in full accord, until he had maneuvered Joe into a corner behind the piano, with two cups of tea and a sandwich on each saucer, and a wonderfully understanding smile from the club president—who perhaps knew a thing or two. So the talk focused gradually to the point that interests us.

"Well, I really am eighteen past, just as I told Carter that time. It's all in the way you tell the truth, Bill, that counts. And you see, mother—well, she hated to have me grow up, so on vacations I acted pretty much like a kid. Partly to please her and partly to please myself, because it's in me and if it doesn't come out during vacation I expect I'd bust during the winter. A nice, efficient kindergarten teacher mustn't use slang. So—maybe I'm kind of like daddy, too, in some ways. I just had to go off and have a real spree. And of course, when you came, it put a real kick in the part. I did enjoy you, Bill. And I'm going to go on calling you Bill—off in corners, like this —— Isn't the president a dear? She's standing guard over us like Lobo! Bless his old heart, how he does despise town!

"Oh, yes, we're all in town. We left the ranch with Nelson and moved in, and daddy's a public accountant and just doing the most splendid comeback you ever saw. It's taken years off mother—the old dear. Oh, and shall I break the news about Barby? And how will you have it, Bill? Gently, or all at once and get it over?"

"Throw your grenade, Joe girl. Is she married?"

Joe looked at him, smiled unexpectedly and leaned closer, one eye on the president's ample back that shielded them.

"Bill, honest, it's the argus' eyewash! That's a new one! Barb knew you knew about the stunt she pulled at the beach, because she says she knows now that she made her little war talk to you by mistake, and put that ring of hers right in your hand. It was perfectly thrilling, and after you gave her the ring and didn't let on, we both sort of expected you to fall in love with each other. You know, the romance of it and all—but love is a darned nuisance, isn't it? Barb couldn't get over Dick, somehow, and then you certainly didn't seem to fall for her so much, so it kind of dragged along and died out—on her part, I mean. She kept thinking that Dick didn't know she had returned his ring with scorn, and was probably running around in circles trying to find her. So when she came back with us, they got together and made it up, of course and—yes, they're married. I'm glad you take it so well."

"I'm mighty glad," said Bill, looking full at Joe, "because I——"

"Oh, and Hank got off with a fine, and daddy paid that for him. And Bill, you ought to go over and see how they worked that moonshining. It would be perfectly adorable in a story. They had the storekeeper at Gold Center for an agent, and he sent all their stuff out to a mine in the hills, and they had one drift that broke through into another cañon, so the fellow that packed the stuff over to our side never showed up at that camp at all, but the foreman carried the stuff through this drift to the other cañon, and he loaded up from there and beat it. Isn't that a gorgeous plot for a story, Bill?"

"Maybe," said Bill absently. "I'm thinking of a love story now, Joe. The plot is, a writer fellow stumbles onto a ranch, and the girl there is—well, something like you, and he thinks she is just a kid, and all the while he's in love with her but doesn't realize——"

"Oh, that reminds me, Bill. I've still got your typewriter, and if you'll go home with me, right now, mom and dad will be tickled pink, and you can stay for dinner and——"

"Are you going to let me finish telling my——"

"Well-l—for goodness' sake, Bill, don't get a ring for her as big as Barby's. I think it's horrid taste. Hers always reminds me of a spotlight. I want one—er—I mean to say——"

Bill smiled dizzily into her eyes.

"That dimple at the corner of your lips is going to get itself kissed in about two seconds, Joe girl—and they can call out the police patrol——"

The club president glanced over her shoulder, shook her head very, very gently, and smiled.

"Run along home, children," she said softly, "and I'll fib for you and say you left long ago. That door behind you opens on a back hallway that will let you out on Grover Street. My blessings and thanks, to both of you. And Mr. Morgan, never dare to doubt the Lord's judgment again."

"Oh, don't you *love* her?" Joe exclaimed the moment their confused good-bys were finished and they were in the back hall that would let them out on Grover Street.

"Who?" William Woods Morgan had plainly forgotten all about the club president, and Grover Street, and everything else in the world except the flushed, smiling little person in the circle of his arms.

THE END.

More of B. M. Bower's work in early issues.

WHAT THE GOSSIPS DO

CAMDEN R. MORRIS, the Chicago lawyer, spent his vacation last summer in the country, and, to relieve his boredom, "listened in" one afternoon on the telephone on whose wire two farm wives were doing their daily gossiping. In a few moments he hung up the receiver with a grimace of disgust.

"There is too much soiled linen hung on a party line," he said.

Clarence Rowe

Talks With Men

By Martin Davison

AN old friend of mine came in here the other day when I was dictating answers to people who had written to me for advice. He is a tight-lipped, silent, cynical man.

"You have an awful nerve," he said after I had wound up the correspondence for the day. "How do you know that you are giving the right advice? You are taking an awful responsibility on yourself."

As a matter of fact I feel the responsibility. But so far as the advice goes—when it is on technical matters I go to experts for information, and when it is just a broad human problem—like most human problems when stated in detail on paper—the right answer, and there is always a right answer, is generally obvious. When we get into trouble with life the difficulty is generally not so much knowing what to do as the lack of the nerve, self-reliance or self-control to go and do it. Often when I have advised a man to do something I find that he had the same idea anyway and that all he needed was a gentle shove to push him into action. And in all the letters I have received in answer to mine, I have yet to get one in which a complaint was made as to the nature of my advice. Sometimes I have given advice that has not been taken—and the recipient of the advice has regretted later on that he did not take it.

One case in point was that of a man of moderate means who wanted to put money into an oil well. He knew nothing about the oil business but he wanted to sink five thousand on the rosy visions held out by a friend of his.

I told him to keep his five thousand in bonds—but the oil well looked too good to him. He said that his ambition was to leave a million dollars to his children.

Since then the oil well has gobbled up not only the original five thousand but about fifteen thousand more. Worse than the loss of the money has been the nervous strain on the victim. Always the oil well is just on the verge of beginning to spout—and so for almost a year this man has been living on that most unwholesome and disheartening of all diets—hope deferred—and it has not agreed with him at all. The worst evil of gambling of any kind is not the loss of the cash, it is the loss of poise, time, energy, and common sense. No man can do good work when he is daily expecting a telegram that will inform him that he has become suddenly rich. To be made suddenly rich would be bad for any one—to live for a year thinking that this is going to happen to you is still worse.

Mark Twain once said something to the effect that a mine was a hole in the ground which happened to be the property of a liar. The same holds good with a great many oil wells.

HERE is a letter from a woman. We are not giving her name, nor the State in which she lives, for reasons that will be obvious. She thinks her problem is insoluble. And yet, after a little consideration, one can see that there is one obvious answer and only one. It is a course that she does not wish to follow and naturally she fools herself into thinking it impossible. It is the course that she is sure to follow in the long run and perhaps my advice may hasten her decision a little. Here is her letter:

"I have looked so often at that picture that goes with your 'Talks,' of course I do not know whether it is you or not, but I've often wished I was one of those young men to whom the older man is talking. I do not know whether you extend your advice to ladies or not, but I am going to ask it anyway in the hope that you are the film of the fatherly looking man in the picture. Mr. Davison, I remind myself of the song—I'm climbing a mountain but it is too high for me. When I think I am near the top I slide right back down again. My story is a true one. I am sincere in asking your advice. My name is a true one and can be verified. I would not want my name published. Not at present, at any rate. After a nervous breakdown gained during that dreadful war, and the immediate illness lasting nearly two years, my husband and I took jobs at a hotel where we could both work and I could be near to watch and care for him, we also got our living which was a great item. But my husband's health did not improve as we expected. Then, on the doctor's orders, we came to the little country town where he could get plenty of outdoor air and home cooking. We borrowed twenty-five hundred dollars from a relative, who took a bill of sale on the place. My husband's health is grand. He does not seem as if he had ever seen a sick day. But the business is a flat failure. We bought a 'White Elephant' and did not know it. We can't even sell, for no one seems to want it. We are clearly living at the expense of the relative and he tells us about it. I believe I will go insane if I can't get something to do to occupy my worried brain. I've answered 'ads' on top of 'ads' for home work that might bring in a little cash—so that we would not be living on the relative—but all these things seem fakes. I can write a fairly good hand and we have a typewriter in the store. I thought I might write circulars or address envelopes. I can also do sewing, but every one here does their own. I am at a disadvantage for I can't get out and canvass or sell anything, for then the folks would start to suspect something was wrong and that would never do. It would also hurt the sale of the place should we find an accidental buyer. Of course we could throw up the whole thing and let him use his 'bill of sale' and get what he could. But that would not be very honorable after he let us have the money. In your wide field of business acquaintance do you know of any bona fide concern that puts out work to be done at home? I believe, could we get a little extra cash to live on, we would be more contented and might some day, in the near future, find a buyer. Will you help me with your advice? I have reached a position that I can't cope with and I hate to admit that I have failed in one of life's big problems."

LET us say that the name signed to this is "Mary," for that is not the name; and let us say that she lives in Kansas, for that is not her State. Whatever her name and whatever the State it is a very human, moving letter.

We call this "Talks with Men," do we? I get almost as many letters from women as I do from men—and sometimes it seems to me the women are more unspoiled and more sincere.

No, I do not think that the cut at the head of this department resembles me especially. It will pass, but no one could ever pick me out on the street just going by that for a likeness.

And now to consider the case of Mrs. Mary Brown of Kansas:

SHE has borrowed money to start a business—or rather buy one—that does not pay and cannot be made to pay. Her letter is sufficient evidence of her ability and good intention. I wonder whether, even before she hears from me, if she has not discovered, just through the very fact of setting down her problem on paper, that there is only one solution to it. She is in a business that she describes herself as a "white elephant." It cannot pay, and it cannot be made to pay. She and her husband are putting a lot of hope and energy into it but at the bottom they know that it is wasted. They are living at the expense of a relative. And from this relative they have borrowed twenty-five hundred dollars. Mrs. Mary Brown says that she is in despair, and well she might be if the only way to do were to hang on getting deeper and deeper into debt. Any one can see from Mrs. Brown's letter that she does not like being in debt.

I have already written her as to the chances of obtaining some employment that she can follow at home while continuing the unfortunate "white-elephant" business. I can say in a general way that unless a person is "gifted," that is to say an artist or writer of some sort, there is little chance of his making a living at home. The easy job, the job that you can do at home, is always a poor one. If you want to make money look out for something hard, difficult and harsh.

But setting aside all this, suppose Mrs. Brown could make money at home? What would she do with it? Sink it of course, in a business—she neglects to describe its nature—which has been losing and will continue to lose.

One of the wisest of financial maxims is the one to the effect that it is silly to send good money after bad. There comes a time in the history of every unfortunate financial enterprise when it is evident that the wisest thing to do is to get out of the game at once and forget what you have lost. Bull-headed stubbornness has ruined many a man and the cleverest player is the one who knows when to quit.

MRS. BROWN speaks of the debt she owes her relative. All right. Let him sell out the business and get what he can for it. Then let Mrs. Brown and her husband give their joint note for the difference between that amount and the original twenty-five hundred. And then let them get jobs somewhere and start in paying it off. That is what they will do in the long run, for they are honest people, and they might as well start in doing it now. Mrs. Brown does not want to start out to work now lest it might hurt the sale of the business. Let her sell the business first and then go to work. What is the use of a business that can't and won't make money?

TO change the subject—a few issues ago I printed a letter from a man in Minnesota who wanted to try farming in Florida or some other place where the winters were not of the north middle States variety. Most people who have wintered in Minnesota or the Dakotas will have at least a slight fellow feeling. Since then I have received letters from all over the country describing attractive farm lands in various localities.

Tidewater Virginia and the Carolinas are especially recommended. The writers suggest chicken ranches, dairy farms, the growing of soya beans on a large scale, truck farming and hog raising as desirable enterprises.

It is undoubtedly true that all this stuff at the proper time and place is good business. Just at present, however, most of the farmers in the country are rather up against it. The trouble may be that there are too many people engaged in raising stuff on the farm and too few busied in the affair of distribution. There is something radically wrong when a farmer receives under three cents a quart for milk which retails for eighteen cents a quart in a city not so very many miles away. What is probably true is that the whole world, this country with the rest of it, is passing through a revolutionary phase. We are becoming industrialists rather than agriculturalists. The old order is changing—and I for one hate to see it change.

But let us be sure that this present tendency is just a phase, and that some day the time will come back when the man who raises the food by which we all live will be assured not only of a livelihood but of a competence.

Shanghai

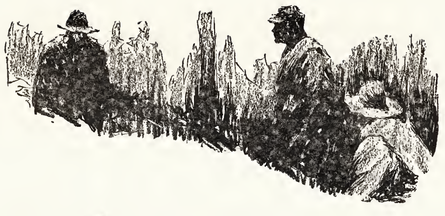
By Berton Braley

THE geese, they always hang high,
In Shanghai, in Shanghai;
And though you drift
The pace is swift
At which you glide along;
The joy bells always rang high,
In Shanghai, in Shanghai;
And night and day
This city gay
Is ever "going strong!"

They knock commandments bang high,
In Shanghai, in Shanghai;
And yet they're not
A naughty lot
When all is said and done.
I hold that laughing gang high,
In Shanghai, in Shanghai;
They're full of jazz,
But, oh, one has
An awful lot of fun!

The jass bands clash and clang high,
In Shanghai, in Shanghai;
And people dance
At every chance
Until the night is gone;
Their pep is undiminished
No party's ever finished
Till in the east
You see at least
The first faint light of dawn!

Existence has a tang high,
In Shanghai, in Shanghai;
Men do not shirk
Their daily work
But when it's done—"Let's go!
Let's go!" they laugh—and hang high
The high lights in Shanghai;
And Gay Paree
Could scarcely be
A more breath-taking show!



The Monster of Moor's Head

By Robert H. Rohde

Author of "The Trail of 'Subject Z,'" "The London Consultant," Etc.

The Great Macumber does a bit of truly novel magic; he pursues his own murderer and is himself the instrument of revenge.

IF the average reader of the New York newspapers remembers anything at all in connection with the case of Austin Dillabough, it will most likely be the fact that a certain detective sergeant won a handsome reward and a well-merited promotion for his ingenuity in bringing the master swindler to book.

The name of the Great Macumber, I am quite sure, was not mentioned by the reporters—and that was as the Great One would have it. From first to last he occupied, by preference, a place in the background; and even after the elapsing of many months it is his pleasure that I refrain from disclosing the extent of the evidence which, on the day preceding that of Dillabough's arrest, he handed over to his collaborator from headquarters.

Though I may not dwell upon its practical worth, I can at least set forth that Macumber's work in the Dillabough affair was done under extraordinarily trying conditions. For once his vocation had failed to accommodate itself to his avocation, and during the month he devoted to the dethroning of the quondam "King of Con" he was making two appearances daily at vaudeville theaters of the Adelphi Circuit in New York and Brooklyn.

At the month's end the Great One was ready for a rest—and willing, for a wonder, to admit that the Rawley wasn't the place to get it. The squalling of motor sirens in Times Square, usually unnoticed, set him on edge. The mildest tinkling of our telephone would renew the jangling of his frayed nerves. By an effort of will he had kept himself awake through a dozen nights while devising the undoing of Dillabough; now insomnia gripped him and he could not sleep.

On the day following our closing at the Heights Palace, and the winding up concurrently of our six weeks' tour of the subway circuit, I had the Rawley's little house physician in to look at the haggard Macumber; and that same evening saw us on our way toward New England and the Maine-coast village of Massatonquit.

Massatonquit, the doctor had said, would offer just the proper degree of quiet for a man in the Great One's shape, and quiet we surely found there on our arrival. Time had been when Massatonquit ships sailed all seven of the seas, when the Massatonquit whaling fleet was a rival to New Bedford's. But the glory of the port lay altogether in the past.

Wind and tides had long ago sealed the pleasant little harbor against important shipping, and trade had languished and died. What might have been another Portland had become, in dotage, a straggling and somnolent village of fewer than a thousand inhabitants, with half its shops shuttered and more than half its venerable dwellings untenanted and falling to ruin.

Even the summer folk passed the place by, for the same fateful tide which had built the bar had gnawed the sand from the Massatonquit beach and left the rocks bare. A few vacationists we did see, but for them Massatonquit village was rather a stopping-off place than an objective. As soon after they had left their trains as the sketchy one-man ferry service permitted, these visitors would be off for the long, low island, called Moor's Head, which lay gray against the horizon to the north and east of our moldering town. Except for a traveling man or two, casual transients of a night, Macumber and I had the local inn to ourselves.

For the first week of what he had promised should be at the least a fortnight's stay, the Great One kept much to himself. He rented a small sailboat, quickly picked up the knack of handling it, and after the first couple of days of cautious navigation within the harbor ventured over the bar and out to sea. On these voyages he went alone, for I had no stomach for braving tide rip and rocks and deep-blue ocean in the cockleshell he fondly called his "ship." I felt myself more comfortable as well as safer on the solid side of the shore line. But after I had spent a half dozen days on the forbidding beach, watching the waves bounce Macumber about in his dory and chucking cigarette ends into the wash, a sense of unutterable boredom came upon me.

The morning of our eighth day in Massatonquit found me praying for a change—and I had no more than turned my back on the Great One at the wharf when my prayer was answered. As Macumber's dory felt the breeze and went careening off, a tall, lean figure with arms and coat tails all flapping came racing along the Dock Road.

"Hi, there!" he yelled. "Hi, there! Call him back!" And I recognized the sharp, high voice as that of Ansel Huff, chief and only constable of the town of Massatonquit and one of the few natives whom the Great One had considered worth cultivating.

Macumber too had heard the shouts, and was swooping back toward the wharf.

"Want me, Ansel?" he called. "What's the trouble?"

"Dunno as I want *you*," replied the constable, laboring for breath, "but I would thank you for the loan of the dory. Got to be gettin' over to th' Head. 'Ficial business over there, I reckon. Like enough I'd be goin' across to-morrer if I was t'wait for th' ferry."

The Great One scrambled to the bow of his boat in time to avert the impending collision with the wharf head, and made fast.

"You wouldn't think of sailing ten miles out to sea in a little ship like this, Ansel?" he queried.

The constable grinned.

"She'd go if it was breezin' a gale. Ever stop to think, mister, that when big ships are founderin' in storms it's dories like the *Marietta* that folks take to for safety? The run from here to th' Head's nothin' for her on a day like this. But I ain't askin' you to chance it, mind!"

"Which happens to make me," remarked Macumber, "all the more inclined to risk the voyage with you. But why the rush, Ansel? What's wrong at Moor's Head? And how is the peace of Massatonquit threatened?"

The swelling in the constable's right cheek transferred itself to the left, and beneath the stringpiece on which he had planted his boots the water splashed ruddily.

"Moor's Head *is* Massatonquit," said he. "Part of Massatonquit township. I'm constable there same as here. As for what's wrong I couldn't exactly say. 'Pears to be somethin' like the case of Jonah and th' whale—only worse. Case of a man bein' carried off by a sea serpent. Wouldn't say I expected to make any arrest, but durned if it ain't a matter fittin' to be looked into by th' law!"

I stared at Huff; Macumber was chuckling.

"The Head would be a handy place for landing contraband," he said. "You don't suppose the serpent came out of a bottle, Ansel?"

The constable shook his head.

"No, siree. There's been talk as far back as I can remember about some man-eatin' critter that's supposed to live out on the sandy end of Moor's Head they call the Turban. *Just* talk, I allus figgered it. But now—I dunno."

"You mean to tell me that some one in his sober senses has seen a sea serpent on the Head?"

"Seen it to his sorrow, I reckon," nodded Ansel Huff. "Leastwise, that's how it sounded to me. You see, the only telephone from the Head to the mainland's one that the guv'ment put into the lighthouse last year, and old Hen Jackson he ain't got used to it yet. Stands as far off, he does, as the wire'll let him when he talks—so's he won't be in so much danger o' gettin' a shock. This time I made him out pretty good, though; could understand nigh to half of what he was a-tellin' me. It seems there was three men, rich summer folks, that went a-gunnin' for big game out along the Turban yestiddy. And Hen says there wa'n't only two of 'em got back. When it come mornin' and Mr. Cartwright Gorton still hadn't turned up, Hen he allowed that *I* ought to be seein' what was what. Though what the law sets down about sea serpents——"

"The serpent is suspected on general principles?"

"Sounds like a better case than that agin' th' critter. 'Twas the serpent they was gunnin' for—and it's Hen Jackson's guess that old Mr. Gorton found it!"

"Ah, an old man, eh?"

"Old and rich. Richest over to the Head, they say."

"Gorton? One of the shipbuilding Gortons, perhaps?"

"Of that strain, I've heard tell. But Cartwright Gorton he's never been int'rested in nothin' as practical as ships. Bugs and butterflies and books—them's been *his* lines."

The Great One looked up with such an expression as I'd not seen on his face since our coming to Massatonquit.

"Butterflies and marine monsters," he murmured. "A far stretch and an intriguing one. Ay, you'll have a shipmate on your voyage to the isle of the serpent, Ansel. What, what? Are we to have another in our crew? You're intending to join us, lad? Come aboard! The master of the *Marietta* bids you welcome! Handily, handily! And for the love of Neptune will you keep those blessed landlubbing feet of yours clear of the running gear?"

II.

The wind had freshened considerably before we were halfway to the island, and with the seafaring constable's assistance Macumber hove to and shortened sail. Even so, the little *Marietta* lay over on her beam ends and pitched and swayed abominably during the remainder of the passage; and I was amazed that Ansel Huff, who finally had taken the manipulation of tiller and sheets out of the Great One's less expert hands, could gabble on with such an appearance of complete unconcern as we zigzagged crazily into the blustering northeaster.

Like every other island along the Atlantic coast, Moor's Head had its tradition of pirate visits and buried treasure; and Huff recalled that in his youth a party of blithe adventurers from Boston had spent a couple of months digging for the ghostly gold of the buccaneers. It was from freebooter days, he told us, that the island's name had come down—a name suggested by its contour on early and more or less fancifully drafted charts. The nomenclature for its bays and promontories also had survived from those brave times. Thus the lighthouse stood on the point still known as the Nose, while the score or so of summer cottages were scattered over the green and hilly southerly sections spoken of as the Neck and the Chin. The broad and barren expanse reaching out to sea, and embracing some twelve square miles, was the Turban. And less by reason of the mythical bugaboo than because of its own natural bleakness, the Turban was shunned. In Ansel's memory only one human had chosen to make his home in the wastes north of the light—this a misanthrope who took his living from the sea, one Abner Bent. And slightly cracked, anyhow, the constable opined, was Abner. I agreed that this must be so when I had seen the man's habitat.

Bent, so it chanced, was the first of the Moor's Head islanders upon whom we were to set eyes. We had come into the smoother waters under the Head's lee when a smaller dory rigged in the same mainsail-and-jib fashion as our own came scooting out of the cove for which Huff was steering. It swept by within a hundred yards of us, guided by a man as lean as the Massatonquit constable and with shoulders abnormally rounded. His leathery thin face was lengthened by a sliver of black beard, and though he was looking directly toward us he did not move to return Ansel's friendly wave. For a minute or two his stare raked us; but when he had changed his course to circle the point which we had just put behind us, he dismissed us with one last fleeting backward glance.

"That was Abner," vouchsafed Huff. "Peculiar cuss, didn't I tell you? If ever he was to speak a half dozen words to once he'd be as hoarse as one of them rah-rah Harvards after the game with the Yales. And as for a-noddin' his head or a-wavin' an arm when it ain't absolutely necessary—well, Abner he's got what you might call theeries. I mind one night years ago when he had a rush o' words, and told me that if all the lost motion in the world was put to work nobody wouldn't have to toil more'n a couple hours a day. Yep; them lonesome fellers does a lot o' deep thinkin', I reckon—and by'n'by their trolley gets to slippin'. Poor Abner, he's been the same way ever since Sally Batcheler up and run off with the Rennolds boy. Been exclusively associatin' so long now with fishes an' lobsters an' th' like that you wouldn't hardly wonder he'd hooked onto their habits o' reflective ca'm an' dignified silence. Suit him better, likely, if there wasn't no lightkeeper and no cottagers on th' Head to be neighbors to him."

We were running in now alongside a spindling dock on which a half dozen islanders clad in the sport shirts and knickers which make up the uniform of the city man at play had gathered as we entered the cove. One of them, a youngish man of beefy build, caught the line thrown up by Ansel and dropped its looped end over a cleat on the stringpiece.

"Gorton's nephew," whispered the constable; and as he climbed to the dock he spoke up:

"Heard your uncle's got himself lost, Mr. Brace. Any news of him yet?"

The other surveyed him coolly after having restored his hands to his pockets. He was bearing up remarkably well.

"That what brought you over, Ansel? Afraid you're too late to help. The island's been searched from end to end—and Mr. Gorton's not on it. Whatever's become of him, that much is certain. There's still quite a crowd beating over the Turban, but——" He shrugged a shoulder. "Not much use, I guess. Every foot of the ground's been covered last night and this morning. You've heard the whole story, I suppose?"

"Just a smatterin', just a smatterin'," protested Huff. "Hen Jackson called me up over to town, and you know how *he* is on a wire. You was along with your uncle, wasn't you, Mr. Brace? I'd like for you to tell me near's you can about what's happened."

A look of injury came to the face of the stout young man.

"Must have told all I know a hundred times already," he complained. "Haven't done much else since midnight. But when it's all boiled down there isn't a lot to be said. Three of us went out on the Turban together yesterday—Mr. Gorton and James Whittlesey and myself. We'd got a late start, and about noon we separated. It was agreed that we'd meet at the light between six and half past. Mr. Whittlesey and I waited until seven. Then we decided that my uncle had misunderstood the arrangement and gone directly home. When another hour had passed and he hadn't showed up we went out beyond the light and shouted. Called at Bent's shack, but he was off somewhere in the dory. Later we paged the cottages, and when we couldn't find any one who'd seen Mr. Gorton we started the search in earnest. Except for the children, there hasn't been a soul on Moor's Head who's slept a wink. Mr. Gorton's gone—and that's the long and the short of it."

Ansel Huff stroked his chin.

"Yes," he said gently. "Yes; but Hen was a-tellin' me something about a sea serpent or some such matter. What was that, Mr. Brace?"

Brace sighed. He cast a look of anguish at the knickered ones.

"That makes the story longer, Ansel. I guess you've heard more than I have about the mysterious *bête noire* that's supposed to inhabit the Turban?"

"Your manner o' speakin' sorta throws me off," confessed the constable. "If it's an animal you mean, I got you. Been hearin' about the Monster of Moor's Head ever since I was waist-high to an eel. But you ain't aimin' to tell me you *seen* it, be you?"

"No. And I'm not so sure I want to—now!"

In their roving Brace's eyes, close set in the wide, puffy face, had been caught by Macumber's.

"If you'll pardon a question by an outsider," the Great One put in, "do you people seriously believe this fabulous creature responsible for Mr. Gorton's disappearance?"

I had climbed out of the dory onto the dock. Brace was to the windward of me, and the breeze bore a pungent whiff of synthetic gin to my nostrils which I held to account for the lightness of his reply and the general blasé nonchalance of his demeanor.

"I'm headquarters for questions, all right," said he. "Fire away. The answer to No. 1 is: 'Yes, we do!' "

"Extraordinary, upon my word!" murmured Macumber. "I never heard of such a thing. And what are the grounds for the belief, may I ask?"

I glanced toward the constable, but his manner showed no resentment of the Great One's intrusion. Apparently quite as well satisfied with the rôle of listener as with that of examiner, he was placidly whittling a corner off a fresh tobacco plug. Brace lit a cigarette before he answered.

"In the first place," said he, "it was in search of the serpent or dragon or diplodocus or whatever the thing may be that the three of us went drumming out through the Turban."

Macumber looked up quickly.

"You had reason to believe it actually existed?"

"Sure we had. The expedition wasn't any joke. We'd seen its tracks."

"Yesterday?"

"Can't say as to that. At least, *I* didn't see any yesterday. But day before yesterday we all saw 'em—Mr. Gorton and Mr. Whittlesey and I, that is to say. Uncle Cartwright's always been a shark on such things. He was tremendously excited when we came upon the prints in the sand. Said the beast was undoubtedly an amphibian, and turned loose a flock of scientific lingo I couldn't make head or tail of."

"You associated the tracks at once with the legend?"

"Oh, yes. There'd been quite a lot of talk recently about the monster—ever since one afternoon when we got old Hen Jackson down to the community house and primed him up with a couple of cocktails and got him to reminiscing. That was last week, and my uncle sort of had the beast on his mind. He had a wild notion there might be a family of the things keeping house on the Turban—survivors of some prehistoric species, you know."

"Possible," assented the Great One. "And did the tracks, Mr. Brace, resemble any you'd ever seen before?"

"Don't pretend to be much on the Leather-stocking stuff. Railroad tracks are about the only kind I can guarantee to recognize at sight. But it wasn't hard to see that those out on the Turban were queer ones. One set were heavy, another set sort of dragging, and then there was a wavy single track running between and through the rest. Uncle Cartwright figured it out that the thing that made 'em had been hurt, and was pulling along the two hind feet. He said it had a tail a good deal like an alligator's, and would probably measure twelve or fourteen feet from the tip of the tail to the snout."

"Where did you strike the spoor?"

"A mile or so north of the light."

"You followed the tracks?"

"They didn't lead anywhere."

"I don't understand."

"Well, you would if you knew the Turban. Mangy sort of place. There'll be stretches of sand and then stretches of beach grass. We found the tracks in the sand, and lost 'em in the grass. It was getting along toward evening, anyhow, and we decided to wait for another day. When we started out yesterday we carried rifles. First we were going to keep together, but so much of the day was gone by the time we got to the Turban that it seemed better to spread out. I went up the middle of the island, while Mr. Whittlesey took the east shore and Mr. Gorton the west."

"And on whose sector were the tracks you'd seen the day before?"

"They'd have been on mine. But they were gone. We'd had a heavy rain during the night. Didn't you get it on the mainland?"

"Yes; plenty of it. And again last night."

"Here, too. So if Mr. Gorton found any tracks yesterday, as we think he must have, *they've* been washed out."

"And his own as well, of course," remarked the Great One. He shook his head. "A sorry business altogether, Mr. Brace."

One of Constable Ansel Huff's lean cheeks displayed a sudden convexity as he set himself for speech.

"The west shore that Mr. Gorton took, was it?" he queried, with his eyes fixed meditatively on the distant coast. "Over

Abner Bent's way that'd be—and Abner was off in his dory, you say? You don't s'pose now, do you, that Bent might 'a' had your uncle with him? He wouldn't just 'a' had a notion of slippin' off and sayin' nothin' to nobody, would he?"

"Nope!" snapped Brace, with a decisiveness that seemed to me unpleasant if not downright brutal. "No chance. Bent was just in here, and we talked to him. He sailed to the mainland yesterday, but he sailed alone."

"Don't happen that nobody's missed a boat, does it?"

"It doesn't," replied Brace curtly, and turned away.

III.

Others were approaching the dock, and Brace advanced to meet them. Leading this oncoming group was a small man in golfing togs lugging a rifle which might, I fancied, have been designed for the use of an ivory hunter—an "express" whose mate I was certain I had once seen in the arms collection of a big-game-stalking friend of Macumber's.

The little man with the big gun shook his head in reply to a question asked by Gorton's nephew, and having sighted Huff came trotting along to him.

"Ha, Ansel!" he cried. "You've come. I asked Jackson to phone you. But I'm afraid it's a case for the coroner rather than the constable that we have here."

"You've found the—the body?"

"No; but I've given up hope of finding Mr. Gorton alive."

"What's become of him? What do *you* think, Mr. Whittlesey?"

The third member of the monster hunt laid his elephant gun on the dock, and solicitously rubbed the shoulder on which it had rested.

"I think, Ansel," said he, blinking behind his spectacles, "that I have lost for all time the most esteemed of clients and the best of comrades. Cartwright Gorton is not on Moor's Head—and there's only one other place where he can be. In the sea, Ansel. Drowned, or——" Whittlesey shuddered. "Or devoured!"

"You blame it on this here serpent, too?"

"What other explanation will you offer?"

Constable Huff shifted his weight from foot to foot and his chew from cheek to cheek.

"I'm stumped," he said. "Most always I've been able to see my duty, but this is the time when I'll have to be askin' advice from you, counselor. What had I ought to do? Go out on the Turban and see what I can find?"

"If you feel you should. But you'll see no more than we have, I fear. All any of us can do is to wait, and hope against hope. It may be that in the course of a day or two Mr. Gorton's body may be cast up on the shore. Only then can we know what has been his fate. Eventually, unless the happy miracle occurs and he returns to us in the flesh, it will be my duty as his attorney to file notice of his demise with the companies in which he was insured. Then they, as parties in interest, will undoubtedly take a hand in adducing proof of death."

As he spoke, Whittlesey's eyes had kept returning to the Great One's face with puzzlement and something akin to recognition in them.

"Your pardon, sir," he said presently. "But haven't we met before?"

Macumber smiled.

"I don't think so."

"Your face is most familiar to me," persisted the other. "Aren't you a Bostonian?"

"No," replied the Great One, his grin broadening, "but I've played Boston a score of times. And good friends have assured me that the portraits on my lithographed paper are a remarkable likeness, though I'd not consider them especially flattering myself. The name's Macumber, sir."

"The detective!" gasped Whittlesey.

"The magician," corrected the Great One firmly.

"But the newspapers——"

"Are prone to exaggeration, Mr. Whittlesey, as perhaps I scarce need to remind a member of the bar. Criminology is my diversion, and at times I have been fortunate enough to achieve practical results. I can only say the press has been more than kind—embarrassingly so. You'll favor me by discounting what you have read. I detest the appellation you've suggested, sir. One who is fond of blooded horses is not of necessity a jockey, would you say?"

"Certainly not. I had no thought of offending. At any rate you will not object if I remark that there seems something almost fateful in your arrival here at this particular moment?"

"Not in the least," said the Great One, restored to good humor. "Personally, I'd call it providential. The quiet of Massatonquit, I'll confess, was beginning to have an effect on my disorganized nervous system precisely opposite to that hoped for by my physician. But the air of Moor's Head, I perceive, may hold just the proper tonic for me. Your mystery, for all that I deprecate its tragedy, has a refreshingly novel aspect. For the first time I feel myself reconciled to my banishment from Broadway. Ready for a tramp, Ansel? Then let's have a look at this terrain you call the Turban!"

Darkness had fallen before we came back to the cluster of cottages at the southern end of the island, and I for one was dog tired. We had covered many miles, and we had seen just what Brace had said we would see—sand and grass. Many footprints of men we had come upon, but these had been made by the searching parties. Of other sorts of tracks we had encountered no trace.

While Ansel Huff went to arrange accommodations for us in the community house, which contained several guest rooms, Macumber paid a visit to the little bungalow he had pointed out as Whittlesey's. We found the lawyer on a veranda fortified with screens and illuminated only by the glow of his cigar.

"Sorry I couldn't offer to put you up," he said, "but you see the sort of shack I have. The only decent bedroom I have is my own, and my Jap uses the other."

"We'll be quite comfortable, thanks," said the Great One; and then with an abruptness foreign to him he remarked: "Look here, Whittlesey! Has it occurred to you that Gorton's disappearance might have been contrived by some human agency?"

"How? Why?"

Macumber struck a match and held it to his pipe. In the radiance thrown back from his cupped hands his face seemed grim.

"Perhaps I've dabbled too much in criminology to preserve a clear perspective," said he. "Perhaps I scent crime where there is none. But there's never such a monster, after all, as Man when evil passions sway him. Mix hate or greed or sometimes fear in the human complex and you have the beast."

From the glow at the opposite end of the veranda I saw that Whittlesey had first turned swiftly toward Macumber and then had taken the cigar from his mouth.

"Agreed," he said. "What's your thought in regard to Gorton's case?"

"That for all the evidence to the contrary he may have been murdered!"

There was a pause before the other spoke, but when his voice came out of the gloom it was unflurried.

"Yes; that's the way the thing would appear to the criminologist, beyond question. The lawyer's viewpoint would not be the same. He admits no crime until it has been proved. His procedure is more methodical, at least, if not more scientific. A man may have been done away with, but the law will not recognize the crime of murder until his body has been produced. The corpus delicti, we say. So Gorton's body, if ever it is found, will tell the story of his end. The autopsy will bare it, and if crime there has been the machinery of law will move. It is the reasonable way."

"A way," said Macumber, "that too often favors the guilty. A slow way—and not a sure one. For the murder of violence the law suffices. But for the murder of finesse —tush! In the cities of the world how many men with blood on their souls and silks against their skins? Thousands, I fancy, and them your law will never touch."

"The law makes no claim to infallibility," interjected Whittlesey mildly.

"And well that it doesn't. In capital cases particularly. *You'll* hide behind a smug commonplace, perhaps. You'll tell me there's no saying truer than 'Murder will out.' And I'll tell *you* there's none more false. For murder, after all, is the simplest of crimes to conceal. A man who's been robbed can complain to the police. But how in this jurisdiction can the man who's been killed file his complaint against the deft assassin?"

"You make an interesting case against dogma," said the lawyer frankly.

"Aye, that I do," was the Great One's complacent comment. "But it's for a purpose, Whittlesey. I'd have you see the matter of Gorton's disappearance—or his death —as I, the outsider, see it. He was by himself in a lonely place, and where is he now? Let's forget the possible monster for a moment and seek the possible motive. Had the man enemies—here or elsewhere?"

"Not one in the world," said Whittlesey quickly. "A simple and friendly man. To know him even casually was to fall under the spell of his charm."

"Men who are best loved have a faculty of inspiring the deepest hatreds. But no mind. We'll consider something else. Who would have profited most by Cartwright Gorton's death, Whittlesey?"

The lawyer drew a long breath, audibly. His cigar end twinkled like a heliograph under the draft of a series of rapid, nervous puffs.

"No one would have profited to any considerable extent," he said presently. "No motive there."

"His bequests were to charities, you mean?"

"No; I mean literally and precisely what I said."

"But he was wealthy."

"He had been wealthy. In recent years he had become obsessed by an unaccountable passion for speculation. It was only with the greatest reluctance that I executed his orders. My pleadings were in vain. He plunged and plunged, and almost always he was on the wrong side of the market. His efforts to recoup became desperate at the last. He went his limit and he lost. If he is dead, the comparatively few thousands of insurance which he carried will be the estate's largest asset."

Macumber whispered a word, and Whittlesey showed himself possessed of a pair of sharp ears.

"Suicide—yes, I've thought of that, of course," he said. "Perhaps that's the answer. A few steps out into the sea would have done the trick, and Gorton's way led along its edge. He may have yielded to a sudden impulse to end his life before the crash. His whole manner of living must have been changed within a few more months."

"Young Brace knows?"

"That I suspect his uncle killed himself? No; you're the first person to whom I've breathed a hint of my secret thought."

"I mean, does Brace know that the Gorton fortune has been dissipated? He'd have come in for a good slice if his uncle had kept away from the market, wouldn't he?"

"Why, yes. But, good Lord, you don't suggest——"

"I suggest nothing, Whittlesey. It's merely a spirit of inquiry that moves me. May I remind you that my question remains to be answered?"

The lawyer hesitated.

"No," he said, "I'm sure he doesn't. In all his speculative transactions Gorton bound me to secrecy. To protect himself from talk he even had me serve as his proxy in all operations on margin. Not a soul in his circle knew he had fallen victim to gambler's fever, and I cannot conceive that he would have told Ted Brace of his losses. The two had not been on cordial terms for many months. Brace got himself into a scrape in the Back Bay, and it cost Gorton a pretty penny to bring him clear—more, in the circumstances, than he could afford. But as for Ted having had anything to do with this——"

"Tush!" said the Great One. "I'm proposing no indictment against the young man. There was at least one other besides him and yourself whom we know to have been on the Turban yesterday."

"Abner Bent!"

"The same. Aye, and there are still other possibilities to look into. What if Cartwright Gorton had come upon a band of rum smugglers making a cache in the beach? Might they not have killed him with a knife thrust and thrown him into the sea? Or could they not have carried him off with them, a prisoner? But always, underlying everything, are those tracks in the sand—the spoor of the monster with the dragging legs and the whipping tail. That's what my mind keeps going back to, Whittlesey. There, I'll be bound, is the nub of the whole ugly business. No, the call of a hundred Times Squares couldn't lure me from the neighborhood of your Turban just now. Here I stay until I know the straight of the mystery of Moor's Head!"

The little lawyer kicked his chair from under him, and switched on a dazzling light in the veranda roof. He went striding toward the Great One with a sunburned slender hand outstretched.

"Then," said he, with a fervor that completely won me to him, "then may you quickly reach the bottom of it, Mr. Macumber!"

IV.

On the following day, Ansel Huff having sailed back to the mainland alone in the *Marietta,* the Great One and I again roamed the Turban wastes. In the late afternoon we looked up the solitary dweller of the dunes, and afterward we visited the lighthouse on the Nose.

By Abner Bent we were received with scant courtesy.

"Didn't see nothin', didn't hear nothin', don't know nothin'," he told us. "Never did and never will. I mind my business and respect them that minds theirs. Whenever I got more to say you won't need to come to me to hear it. I'll come to you." And then he applied himself so assiduously to the mending of the net he had spread out on the sunny beach that Macumber shrugged resignedly and walked off.

At the light the ancient keeper greeted us in a manner that atoned for his neighbor's churlishness—with open arms and an uncorked bottle of a Scotch which save for a certain admitted tenderness of years the Great One pronounced the equal of his own prized MacPherson. But the gain we made through Jackson was chiefly in the matter of his hospitality. He could offer neither concrete fact nor tenable theory in connection with the vanishing of Cartwright Gorton.

The old man's memory of the legend of the monster of Moor's Head, though, was a great deal clearer than Ansel's.

"It's come down to us from the Indians, that story," he said. "Yes, sir, it goes way back to the days when the red man had these parts to himself. Used to be a little half-breed boy I knew that had got it from his Indian mommy, an' her from *her* mommy an' so on. Let's see—what was it, now? Oh, yes. Sorta poeticlike, it was, the way they put it up. The monster was 'half o' the water and half o' the land.' Didn't maul or claw people, but choked 'em and then gobbled 'em up. Took a grip on its prey as strong as the grip of the tallest tree onto the ground, and could dispose of a hundred husky warriors as easy as one. An' that's about all I remember. Some ani*mile,* hey?"

Ansel Huff had come off again from Massatonquit in the dory and was awaiting us when we got back to the community house.

" 'Bout ready to go back?" he asked.

"Not by a jugful of the best!" exclaimed Macumber. "Something tells me I'll recuperate a deal faster over here on the Head than I would idling in Massatonquit. But if you're going to make the trip again to-morrow, I think I'll send the lad with you to gather up our belongings at the inn and bring 'em over."

So, since the excitement on Moor's Head and his routine duties in Massatonquit had committed the constable to the existence of a maritime commuter, I found myself once more a passenger aboard the *Marietta* next morning. It was midafternoon when Ansel returned me to the island, and during the last hour of the voyage rain had been falling. One of the cottagers volunteered the information that Macumber had walked out toward the Turban soon after seeing me off in the dory, and I started away after him while the constable was furling the *Marietta's* much-patched sails. In our cargo from Massatonquit, fortunately—thrice fortunately—had been an umbrella. This I took with me, for in our hasty departure from New York I had neglected to pack a raincoat.

An hour of fast walking took me past the light and past Abner Bent's lean-to. And then, as I made my way along the west shore of the Turban, I became suddenly and acutely aware that I was not the day's first traveler in that direction.

At my feet, running parallel, were two sets of tracks made by those who had gone before—tracks that were of human feet, and tracks that were not. As to Brace, the animal tracks seemed to me "queer ones." One set was heavy, another dragging; and between the two appeared the wavy line that Cartwright Gorton's gin-perfumed nephew had described to us on the Moor's Head dock—the line which Gorton himself had said was made by the alligatorlike tail of a reptile that might be twelve feet in length or even fourteen.

I was mightily tempted to turn back. Such a course, I thought, would argue no lack of proper valor in an unarmed man when one who had carried a rifle had already been done for by this nameless creature whose progenitors—perhaps whose very self—the savages of the North woods had walked in fear of in centuries gone by.

But the presence of those other human tracks bade me go on. They were the Great One's, I knew; for beside them, not more than a couple of yards from where I had halted, lay one of those shiny wax matches which Macumber fancied and whose like would surely not be found in the pockets of any other man on Moor's Head.

A question of whether Macumber was the stalked or the stalker came to my mind, and at once the simple answer presented itself. The tracks of the thing with the tail were much fainter than the prints of the Great One's boots. The Moor's Head monster had gone first; Macumber, happening on its trail, had followed. And I, with the futile umbrella held as a javelin, pressed on.

Sometimes I lost both trails in the beach grass, to pick them up again on sandy stretches beyond. But fainter and fainter all the tracks grew under the beating of the rain, until at last there was only the deep winding groove cut by the giant lizard tail to guide me.

At last, bursting through a wall of rank grass that grew as high as my head, I came to an open expanse of perhaps a half dozen acres. The waters of a wide cove lapped the shore to my left, and at the right and far beyond other such grassy jungles as that through which I had come closed in the glistening plain of sand.

Once more I picked up my guide line, waving off toward the single tuft of grass which sprouted from the middle of the plain. I stepped off at a bolder stride; for here, where no thickets of weeds offered concealment to a lurking reptilian foe, I felt myself in comparative safety.

The wet sand crunched crisply under my heels. Then I struck a spot, just about abreast of the lonely grasses, where I sank over my shoe tops. Here the sand, for all its seeming solidity of surface, was slush. But, like a fool, I gave no thought to the treacherous footing and pushed ahead. Two or three more steps were all I could take. Then I was down to my knees—to my thighs—to my waist. And as I sank ever deeper with my struggles the thought rang in my brain that this bed of unsuspected quicksand moistly engulfing me might well have been the "monster" of Indian legend. It was with the grip of great tree roots that the stuff held me and drew me; and a hundred like me, all together in the same boat, could have been no less helpless.

Unquestionably it was the umbrella which gave me my chance for life. I had clung to it as I sank into the deadly man trap. Its handle had gone deep into the sand, and I clutched desperately at the ferule. A moment later I found myself in possession of the flimsiest of life preservers, an air cushion of fragile silk. With my heart missing beats I gave my weight to it. A fraction of an inch at a time I raised myself, until after what must have been more than an hour and seemed a dozen eternities on end I had stretched myself flat on the mucilaginous quaking surface. With my weight thus distributed, gingerly transferring the umbrella a bit at a time toward terra firma, I made my way back to the grass that marked the end of the quicksand. But not until I was well past the clump of green did I venture to stand upright. Then I was on sand as solid underfoot as stone.

I was a minute or two pulling myself together; and I had no more than overcome the nausea that followed my deliverance when a thought as horrible as any of those which had visited me while I felt myself sinking to my death flashed upon me.

Macumber! He had gone ahead of me on the same trail. No miracle of his would have saved him here. He was dead—buried deep down in this uliginose grave into which I had been so near to following him.

Another thought came unbidden, so clear and at once so vividly logical and so astonishing that I accepted it not as my own but as one imparted by the surviving intelligence of the master magician who, with all his spectacular powers of wonder-working, had blundered into this viscid cul-de-sac for want of the elementary sixth sense by which men of lesser attainment habitually steer clear of like dangers.

Macumber's fate had been Gorton's. They had gone the same way. Following the spoor of one monster, they had been delivered into the maw of another. In turn they had been drawn to what had been certain death—lured by no creature that walked on four legs but by a monster who traveled on two, a murderous monster who had found a potent ally in a myth.

I did not need the living Macumber's logic to persuade me now that the tracks which Gorton assumed to have been those of some gigantic saurian had been made in reality by a man. Into the front of my mind had crowded recollection of a curious case in the West which had interested the

Great One a year or two since—a crime in which an inspired rascal had made his escape by motor and yet left the authorities convinced that the one they sought would be astride a horse. And he had contrived that the pursuit should be leisurely by no more involved a procedure than securing horseshoes to his soles and leaving a confusion of apparent hoofprints in his victim's yard.

That had been the Westerner's method. This was more subtle. A direct trail had been left, the tracks of a nonexistent monster had been materialized by one who knew of the quicksand out beyond sight and earshot of the summer colonists of Moor's Head. Gorton had run them out, and died. Then Macumber had come; Macumber, with his formidable reputation as a criminologist and his avowed purpose of haunting the Head until he knew what had become of Gorton—and the man trap had been baited for him.

As I stood looking out shudderingly over the deadly sands a faint cry came to me. In a moment it was repeated. Some one was shouting my name. I answered, and presently Constable Ansel Huff came pushing through the high grass. There was something hesitating and wary in his advance, once his way led over the sand, and it flashed upon me that here was one at least who knew that the walking hereabouts was dangerous. For an instant my new and violent distrust of all on the island shaped into an uncertainty in regard to Ansel himself, but I fought the thought away.

The man was curiously impassive, it seemed to me, as I broke the news of my irreparable loss. Only when I told him of my own narrow squeak did his face show anything remotely resembling concern.

"Gosh a'mighty!" he exclaimed. *"That'd* 'a' been a purty kettle o' fish!"

My theory of the origin of the spoor followed first by Gorton, then by the Great One and finally by myself appeared somehow to fall short of astonishing the constable. He spat into the sand.

"Waal," he said, "it's somethin' to look into. Don't sound hardly possible to me, though." And again that queer expression of constraint sat upon him.

I asked a sudden question, and watched him closely:

"Ansel, you knew of the existence of this quicksand before I'd said a word, didn't you?"

Huff took a time to answer.

"I won't tell you no lie," he said at length. "Yep. I knowed about it."

His face told me nothing except that he had thought hard before replying. For a few seconds he had concentrated so intensely that the rhythmic rise and fall of his lower jaw had been suspended.

"Then why," I demanded, "didn't you tell him—in time?"

"S'posin' I didn't know it myself until a little while back?"

"You found out recently?"

"Yep."

"How?"

"I—I heard summat."

"When? Where?"

"Here on th' Head. Since we come over from Massatonquit."

"Who told you?"

Again the constable took thought.

"Ain't a-goin' to say," he announced.

"Why not?"

"Becuz," said Ansel Huff with a gentle and regretful finality, "sayin' might somehow sorta tend to defeat th' ends o' justice."

V.

Ansel Huff, as was made plain on our walk back from the Turban, had other peculiar notions concerning the proper conservation of his "ends o' justice."

"Be a sight better," he counseled, "ef you don't let on you know a thing about the quicksand, let alone been plumb into it. Yep, I reckon th' closer you keep your mouth th' quicker we'll be learnin' what we want to find out. Jest you forget what's happened, an'——"

"Forget!" I ejaculated bitterly. "This is a day I'll never forget. I'm almost sorry that your Moor's Head monster didn't swallow me, too. But it was for a purpose my life was given back to me. The work that Macumber began on this island will be finished before I leave it. I'm going to have guidance, Ansel. By the Lord, I've had it already! I could swear that Macumber has established communication with me—that while I stood at the edge of the quicksand he broke through the barrier, and was close to me!"

At last I had succeeded in startling the constable. He stared at me.

"You *saw* him?"

"No," said I. "It wasn't necessary to see him. I felt his presence. Don't think I credit my own unassisted imagination with my theory that the tracks out on the Turban were made by a monster in the shape of a man. That was Macumber—typically."

Huff slacked his pace.

"I don't take no stock in speerits," he said; "but them as does is welcome to think as they choose. But here we're a-comin' to the cottages, and I gotta speak quick what's on my mind. The ends o' justice, like I said afore, will get a better chance o' workin' themselves out ef you do as I say. We'll act like's ef we'd been huntin' the Turban for Mr. Macumber and expected to find him here. By'n'by we'll get good an' scared for him, and then we'll sorta get up a reg'lar searchin' party like they did for old Mr. Gorton. Mebbe when we get a certain somebody to th' edge o' th' quicksand we'll——"

"But at night!" I protested. "I don't think that in the dark——"

"Pshaw!" said Huff. "You city folks got me beat. Allus 'lowin' what a beautiful moonlight night it *is* but never lookin' ahead and sayin', 'What a beautiful moonlight night it's goin' to be!' Yep; it'll be bright as you'd want all evenin'. Full moon's on th' card."

The constable seemed to have some of the confidence I had been used to observing in Macumber. Schooled to obedience, I deferred to him. For the time, I told myself, I could afford to let him play his hand; if his plans failed, other days would be coming when I could try mine.

And Ansel, I could see, was satisfied with the manner in which I acted my part during those hours in which we grew gradually more concerned for the safety of our missing Macumber and finally when we went from cottage to cottage calling for volunteers to accompany us out onto the Turban.

We had been at the Whittlesey bungalow when our talk of organizing a search party crystallized into action, and the little lawyer offered himself as the first of our recruits. He came after us toting the terrific rifle which had been his companion when first I saw him marching with his posse toward the Moor's Head dock.

"This'll stop anything we're likely to meet," he said. "It may mean a broken shoulder to pull the trigger—but I'll gladly risk that. By gad, this is a frightful state of affairs! What if we find Macumber maimed, or killed?"

One of our first calls after leaving Whittlesey's was at the Gorton cottage. The loutish nephew had been stirring himself what had been obviously a protracted series of gin cocktails, and was more than a trifle under the weather; but Huff was persistent when he demurred.

"Case where every man'll count, Mr. Brace," said he. "May mean life 'r death to th' man we're a-worryin' about, and there's a lot o' ground to cover on the Turban."

At the time I made a grim little mental note on the subject of the nephew's reluctance; yet there were few who responded with alacrity to the constable's call, and it was a posse of morose and silent men that he led toward the Moor's Head bad lands. We made just an even dozen—an unlucky thirteen when Ansel had rapped up the phlegmatic Abner Bent. Each man carried, shouldered or at the trail, some manner of shotgun or rifle; and as we marched in rather too-close formation over cool sands and through sharp grasses, it might have been a landing party from some spectral pirate ship for which the low-hung moon lit the way.

Beyond the lighthouse there was a halt for conference, and Constable Huff told off his force into three squads. Four men, in order as extended as their individual courage would permit, were to cover the eastern section of the Turban. Another four were assigned to search the central sector, and Ansel and I with the remaining trio were to push along the west shore.

"I'm takin' the west side myself," said Ansel before the subdivided groups parted company, "because that's where I expect there's most likely to be somethin' doin'. Mr. Whittlesey comes along because he's got the heaviest gun; Abner Bent because he's got the sharpest eyes, and young Mr. Brace because it's his right as next o' kin to Mr. Gorton. Nobody's to shoot unless'n he really sees somethin', and at the shot we'll all make for the place where it come from. Otherwise we'll keep a-goin' until we come together again up to th' top o' the Turban."

Huff made no direct allusion to the monster of Moor's Head, nor did he have to. From the moment of setting forth it had been accepted that our expedition was as much a hunt for big game as a search for Macumber, a punitive raid thrusting toward the lair of the legendary horror of the Head.

Whittlesey, as we turned our backs on the others, hoisted his blunderbuss from his shoulder and bore it across his chest, with a nervous white hand clutching the trigger guard.

"A popgun would be easier to carry, but I feel a great deal safer with my heavy artillery," he said. "Mine's a gun that's seen service in Africa. Stopped a rhino or two in its day. If the friend who gave it to me didn't embroider the truth, it'll account for anything we're likely to meet on Moor's Head. Better let me have first crack if we do sight the creature."

The only comment was a grunt from Brace, who had made a surprising progress toward sobriety during the tramp. Under the moon his face showed waxy, and he seemed already in the throes of a nervous reaction from his recent mellowness. Unobtrusively, I kept him under my eye.

When we came at length to the edge of the moon-bathed sweep of sand which held the monstrous sink hole it was Gorton's nephew who held back. Closing in at Ansel's call, I found him expostulating with some energy.

"No use plowing across here," he was saying. "Ought to skirt through the grass, eh?"

"That's the idear," contributed Abner Bent unexpectedly. "We can *see* there ain't nothin' ahead over the sand."

"That's so," agreed Whittlesey. "Plain as daylight."

But the constable, shaking his head, strode off. Two or three hundred yards he trudged on, then waited for the rest of us to overtake him. The moon had dropped low beyond the open space and threw fantastic long shadows back onto the sand; shadows that crawled as the breeze stirred the grasses.

Where Huff had halted the shadowy spears of the lone clump of grass standing sentinel in the midst of this place of lurking terror, sole recognizable mark of division between sands that would support and sands waiting to swallow, stretched just to his toes. He raised his voice as we joined him:

"Gosh a'mighty! My bones sorta tell me we're a-drawin' nigh onto—onto what we come lookin' for. Best be ready with that gun o' yours, Mr. Whittlesey. Hi, now! Lissen! Hear it?"

A sound chillingly and hideously inhuman came to my straining ears—a moaning from somewhere out beyond the grass clump that had loomed as a handhold on life for me a few hours before. Then, some fifty yards on the unhallowed side of the grass, showed a wavery light that seemed to spring out of sands.

"Look!" cried Huff, pointing with a bony shaking finger. "What's *that?*"

A score of times I had aided the Great Macumber in exposures of fraudulent mediums. Now I experienced an authentic psychic thrill for the first time in my life. In the farther world Macumber, it seemed, still had found his earthly magic of avail. A figure was shaping in the ghostly glow, and that figure was his. It rose, like the light, from the sands: first a writhing arm, then a head twisted on a limp neck, another arm and a struggling torso.

The apparition was developing legs when I wrested my eyes from it. Brace had covered his face with his hands; Abner Bent, his leathery cheeks livid, was backing away. Whittlesey and the constable were staring, as I had stared.

"Macumber!" gasped the lawyer. "Alive!"

"No!" cried Huff, and there was an hysterical sharpness in his high-pitched voice. "He can't be alive, Whittlesey. That's quicksand out there. See? He's a-walkin' on it like 'twas solid earth!"

My startled eyes flew back toward the man trap. The wraith was much nearer now. The hair hung stringily about the dead-white face—Macumber's face. The clothing dropped damp and shapeless about the unsubstantial frame, like a shroud. A spectral finger lifted, and rustily spoke the voice of the shade of one who manifestly had been a Scot.

"Gor-r-ton! Gor-r-ton!" it wailed. "Rise with me! Let your finger be upon our-r assassin, too!"

Behind me there was a thump. James Whittlesey's rhinoceros gun had dropped to the hard sand.

"Halt!" shouted Constable Ansel Huff. "Head him off, somebody!"

But Whittlesey, relieved of the weight of his African rifle, already had traversed more than half the short distance to the cove. For an instant his narrow shoulders were etched sharply against the roundness of the sunken moon. Then he threw himself headlong from the high bank into the deep and chilly waters beyond.

Less sepulchral in its sound, I heard Macumber's voice again. His hand was on my shoulder.

"What, what, lad? Upon my reincarnated soul, you look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

Ansel Huff had returned from the cove.

"And nigh enough to bein' a ghost th' young feller come himself," said he; and when he had briefly told of my experience in the quicksand the Great One's face, though he had taken the powdery white from it with a sweep of his handkerchief a moment since, once more was pale.

"Great Lord, youngster!" he groaned. "If only I'd known I'd have perished with worry for you. As it was, I thought it enough to send Ansel to look you up when I encountered him on the Turban this afternoon. Aye, I'd discovered the Moor Head monster myself by then, and I'd thoughts and theories in regard to it and a plan. As for the reptilian tracks, did you not observe that the front claws were gone from the bearskin rug in Whittlesey's bungalow and that the tail was filled with sand? Ho, Ansel! What about the little rogue?"

"Gone—and saved us trouble. Bank shelves off sharp to a depth of a dozen fathoms where he went over. Brace says he can't swim a stroke."

"But Whittlesey——" I gasped.

"To be certain it was Whittlesey who blazed the trail to the quicksand," said Macumber. "True enough some one had been speculating with Gorton's money, and the fortune was gone. But I fancy the speculating some one wasn't Gorton. A moment of revelation was at hand. Gorton had to be put out of the way—quickly and as neatly as might be. The old light keeper, reviving the monster myth, suggested a fortuitous way. Concerning Whittlesey's knowledge of the quicksand, I can only point out that he's been spending his summers on Moor's Head for thirty years past. Been here even longer than Cap'n Hen Jackson and Abner Bent."

Mentally I was emulating the caged squirrel.

"But, maestro!" I protested. "You're dead! You must be! Who but a wraith could be borne up by a quicksand?"

Macumber grinned.

"I'd not deceive you, lad. Naturally I can't walk on quicksand. My magic embraces no formula for that."

"I saw you do it," I told him. "That grass——"

"Oh, the grass of course was significant," assented the Great One genially. "To one with knowledge of the quicksand its position meant much. But you've no idea how easy this light sand is to shovel, youngster. I dare say it took me not fifteen minutes to shift your landmark a hundred feet farther onto solid earth!"

Another Great Macumber story in the next issue.

* * *

THE HANDICAP

When John T. Adams was chairman of the Republican national committee, he went to Washington to discuss with half a dozen of his cronies the then not altogether bright, brilliant and iridescent future of the G. O. P. Just when the pall of gloom had somewhat lifted from the assemblage, somebody brought up the name of a Republican who wears horn-rimmed spectacles, is exceedingly vindictive and writes invective that wilts the enemy every time. The general opinion of those there assembled seemed to be that the campaigner in question was a fearful handicap on Republican hopes. He insisted on taking part in the next fight; he was sure to alienate more voters than he won; and there was no way to get rid of him.

"Last summer," concluded the discouraged Adams, "there was a man out in Chicago, a sick man who had just emerged from the bogs, miasmas and glooms of a prolonged delirium. Feeling soft yet vigorous arms around his shoulders and breathing the fragrance of a woman's hair, he ecstatically murmured: 'Where am I? In heaven?'

"'No, darling,' replied his wife's voice; 'I am still with you.'

"Now you gentlemen know how despairing I feel of ever getting to that political heaven in which this guy we've been talking about won't muss up campaigns."

A Chat With You

IN the mail this morning we received a letter from an astrologer. In some fashion he had learned the date of our birth and proceeded to cast our horoscope. It is true that the letter was a form letter suited to any one who has the same birthday as we have—but it is interesting. And what is more, for five dollars we can have a more detailed reading telling us a whole lot more about ourselves.

* * * *

LET me lift the veil from your eyes," implores the astrologer, who signs himself Veritas. "You have thought that everything was against you in the past. This has been due, my friend, to the fact that you have been fighting your benefic influences. Rightly guided, success is in store for you. You, with your wonderful psychic and intuitional nature, full of inspiration, should seek always to have about you a strong band of spirit forces. They will guide you and direct you. A great opportunity for you is at hand; see that it does not pass away. Open your eyes to this chance which may never occur again. There is one thing lacking in your life and which you can attain by taking advantage of the knowledge which my special advice will give you. It may change your whole future life. You have a restless and disconnected feeling that you cannot account for. You have certain gifts that brought out would make you successful. The turning point in your life may now be very near. Be awake to the chances fortune offers you.

"Your longings, hopes and desires have come to nothing, so far, because you are not properly placed in life. You are not in attune with the force of success. That which is lacking in your life can be brought about. You have times of doubt and trouble, but it can be brought to an end and the sunshine of a new life realized.

"As you are guided now so may you be to the end either a grand success or failure. Which will you choose? It is up to you. What is of more importance than life's happiness? Act now."

* * * *

ACT now," means, being translated into the concrete, to send five dollars to Mr. Veritas so that he may tell us just what to do. As a matter of fact we are holding on to the five dollars and passing up the good advice.

The letter however, is, after its fashion, well written. If you study it carefully you will find that it fits the case not only of any one whose birthday happens to be the same as ours, but of any one whatsoever. Three quarters of the trick in all fortune telling, crystal gazing and astrology is talking in broad generalities and allowing the hearer to interpret it in his own way. Every one has thought at times that things were against him. Every one is going to make either a success or failure out of his life. Every one feels that there are opportunities for him and that he must not let them slip away. Every one has at times a restless and discontented feeling that he cannot account for. Every one has had many longings, hopes and desires that have come to nothing. Every one, from Napoleon to the corner bootblack has felt that at times he was not attuned to the forces of success. Every one has times of doubt and trouble and, in a sense, every moment in every life is a turning point.

* * * *

WITHOUT consulting the stars, without asking the advice of any wizard or soothsayer, we can give ourselves more practical and better counsel than we can purchase from any stranger for five dollars. The advice is something like this—"Get out a better number of The Popular next time, and then get out a better one after that."

* * * *

WHETHER or not, as some apparently intelligent people think, there is something in astrology makes very little difference. If the stars affect our destinies, what can we do about it? Our affair is the immediate task, and it is ten to one that common sense, vigilance and industry are better guides than the vague directions of fantastically named planets. There has always seemed to us something unmanly in accepting the judgment of any soothsayer whatsoever. We know of Wall Street brokers and other financially successful people who follow such guides and seem to get good results, but it has never seemed to us the right way to do business.

* * * *

THERE is, however, such a thing as a run of luck, whether the stars have anything to do with it or not. Sometimes a man seems to be getting all the breaks of the game, sometimes they are all against him.

Just at present things are breaking right with us. The stars must be wearing their favorable aspects. For years it has always been our feeling that the biggest fish was still uncaught, that the best story was still unwritten and that some time, somehow, we were going to get out an issue of the magazine that would beat anything we had done in the past. It seems now as if we had made it. Everything broke right. The stories and the authors appeared in the nick of time, as if by magic. We really had very little to do with it—but it is a solemn fact that the next issue, The Popular out two weeks from to-day, comes nearer being the ideal fiction magazine than anything we can remember.

* * * *

THE number opens with a complete book-length novel by Bertrand Sinclair, author of "North of Fifty-three" and many other notable successes. It is called "Twice in the Graveyard Watch." Sinclair has been away from these pages for a good while, but he has come back with one of the best things he has ever done. Masculine, rugged, vigorous, a stirring tale of the big outdoors, it is as stimulating and refreshing as anything we can imagine. The other contributors to the number are Stacpoole, Holman Day, who comes back with a delightful novelette of the New England woods, Montanye, H. H. Knibbs, Jack O'Donnell, with a great race-track story, Winter with a Western tale, Von Ziekursch, Brown, Roy Hinds and Rohde.

Now that we think of it, the stars did have something to do with it—for are not the foregoing all stars of the first magnitude?

Beware of Fat

DO you know whether you weigh too much or too little? If your weight is just right, congratulate yourself. Probably not one person in ten knows what his proper weight should be nor realizes how important it is to maintain that weight.

What is the right weight? Experts who have studied the subject of weight in its relation to health tell us that the weight tables generally in use are misleading. They give only average weights, which are the composite of the good and the bad. These averages have been assumed to be the correct weights. As a matter of fact, they are not.

Up to the age of 30, it is well to weigh five or ten pounds more than the average weight for your age and height. But from 30 on, the best weight is from 10% to 20% less than the average. At age 50, men and women are at their best when they weigh considerably *below* the average for their height.

The reason is simple: The extra weight in earlier years is needed to give the body plenty of building material and to fortify it against tuberculosis and other infections to which young people are particularly subject. When we are older and food for growth is not needed, there is no longer any advantage in carrying the heavier burden of weight.

Stop and think of the six oldest people you know. The chances are they are not fat. Life insurance statistics have proved that as a rule the fat do not live to be really old men and women.

Fat is dangerous—a definite menace to life. And this is why: People who drag masses of flesh around are putting a strain upon their vital organs. High blood pressure, trouble with heart, kidneys or lungs often follow along in the train of excessive weight. The heart has to work extra hard pumping blood to tissues that the body *never was meant to have.* The digestive tract has a remorseless burden put upon it trying to dispose of needless food. An eminent specialist says that in at least 40% of the cases—fat is the predisposing cause of diabetes.

Remember, prevention is the better part of reducing. But if you *are* fat and don't want to have heart trouble or any of the diseases that fat induces—what are you to do about it?

Do not take any "fat reducers" except on the advice of your physician. They are usually viciously harmful and reduce nothing but your pocketbook. Have your doctor find out whether there is anything wrong with you physically. Sometimes glandular disturbances will cause fat.

Overweight is not always due to overeating. Exercise does not always reduce. But 90 times out of 100 the trouble is too much and too rich food and too little exercise. If you are overweight do not let laziness or complacency permit you to remain fat. Begin to reduce *right now.*

THE LIGHT THAT NEVER FAILS

People past their youth who weigh 20% more than the average have a one-third greater death rate than the average. Those who are 40% overweight have a 50% greater death rate than the average.

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company recognizes overweight as so serious an impairment among its policyholders that it has issued a booklet which contains much valuable information for those who wish to reduce their weight.

This is the booklet that tells of the methods we have used in bringing a certain group of our own Metropolitan employees back to normal weight.

This simple regime of diet and exercise has been found to be most effective. In several cases as much as 50 pounds have been eliminated—safely and comfortably.

In this booklet will be found a weight table prepared according to the latest study on the subject, as well as a complete program of diet and exercises that will help you to reduce your weight if you are organically sound.

A copy of "Overweight—Cause and Treatment" will be mailed free to anyone who asks for it.

HALEY FISKE, *President.*

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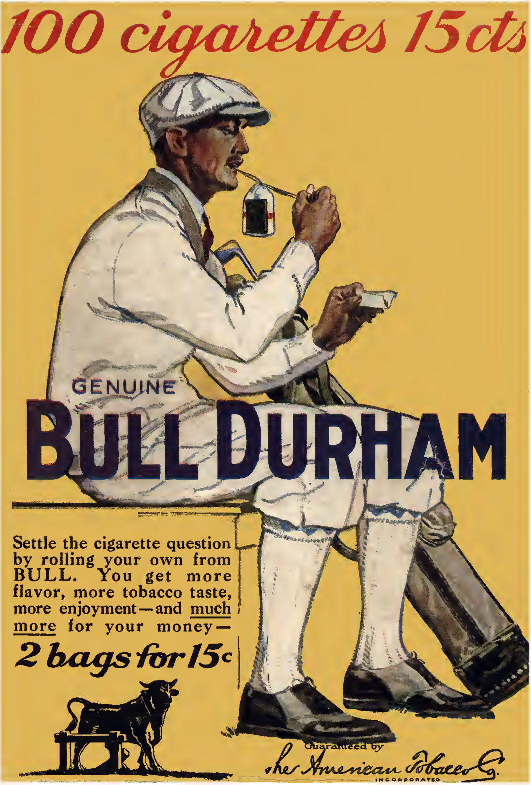

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