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A NOVEL OF
THE THEATER.

by Albert M. Treynor



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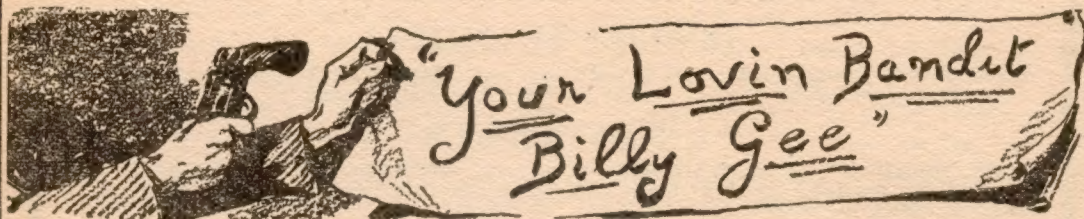
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❖ *A Story of the Theater* ❖

The Million-Dollar Mystery - *Dg* Albert M. Treynor ~

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

TAKING ALL PRECAUTIONS.

IN pattern and cut the dress was nothing unusual. It was just a little sleeveless, short-skirted dancing frock. But its cost was one million dollars. Neila Lester was holding the garment gingerly for Bob Wray's inspection, with the shoulder straps hooked over her two thumbs. "Like it?" she asked.

The frock had been Wray's idea in the first place, but as he turned to look, he arched his brows in depreciative humor and refused to commit himself. "I suppose a lot of people would call it a knock-out," he replied.

Neila Lester's white hand flickered among the hard, glittering fringes that

draped the skirt and bodice, awakening the iridescent sparkle of living flames.

"Two thousand diamonds," she began; "commercial whites, averaging about a carat apiece, none of them bad—five hundred thousand dollars' worth. Eighteen hundred pearls of the first water, with a sprinkling of baroques and a handful of Chinese 'pinks.' There are nine hundred and twenty rose rubies in the girdle. The three emeralds in the buckle run nearly seven carats each. They're a rare grass-green shade, perfectly matched, flawless—triplets that you couldn't duplicate in another hundred years of searching—worth any price you might put on them." The young woman shrugged her shapely shoulders. "The trimming for one dress—valued at a million at least. I appraised the stones myself."

"I hope they're sewed on tight," remarked Wray.

"Fastened with fine-spun wires, unbreakable steel threads, woven and interwoven through the silk fabric." Neila Lester shook the dress until the fringes clicked together. "I love the stones for themselves, but when they're misused like this——" She made a grimace of distaste. "This thing's an affront, an abomination! Ugh!"

"I can't hand you much on it myself," admitted Wray.

Neila fixed him with a reproachful, blue-eyed glance. "Then why did you do it?" she asked.

"To attract attention these days you've got to make an awful racket around the place," Wray explained. He met the girl's gaze with a half-apologetic, half-defiant grin and, in spite of his six feet of brawny, up-standing manhood, he looked at that moment as sheepishly appealing as a little boy caught red-handed in the jam closet.

Attracting attention, however, was Bob Wray's profession, and he was forced to do things in a business way that he never would dream of thinking about had he been left to his own naturally modest devices. He was the publicity director of the Consolidated Amusement Enterprises, a corporation that owned and operated a chain of high-class vaudeville houses, reaching out of New York City halfway across the continent. It was his job to make that circuit of theaters scintillate in the public eye as conspicuously as the moon and all the constellations of stars in the sky.

The creation of a million-dollar dress—the costliest gown in the world—was just an item of his daily work. The fabulous frock was to be worn on the stage by Mademoiselle Magya Marat, the famous Parisian dancer, who, after much dickering and bickering, had signed a contract to play twenty

weeks of Consolidated time. Her American début was to be made that evening at the Curtain Theater in New York City, and the glamour of the dancer's reputation, together with her advertised costume of jewels, had proved a double lure to draw endless lines of ticket buyers up to the box-office window.

The few quarts of gems used to bedeck mademoiselle's dancing frock were lent for the occasion by McAllister & McAbe, a firm of enterprising jewelry importers, who were not averse to a bit of advertising on their own account. Neila Lester, one of the concern's experts, had been intrusted with the work of sorting and matching the stones and stringing them in festoons for draping.

Mademoiselle Marat's dressing room was McAllister & McAbe's burglar-proof vault. Except for the ten minutes during which she occupied the stage, and the short periods of her trip to and from the theater, her costume was kept hanging behind time bolts and thick steel doors.

As he had been the first man to think of the dress, Wray felt that he had the right to be the first to see it. So he had visited McAllister & McAbe's strong room a few minutes ahead of mademoiselle's make-up time and there had found Neila Lester; also six huskies who had been assigned to guard duty by the Metropolitan Protective-Detective Agency.

A couple of good men with pistols ought to have been able to keep bandits at bay while mademoiselle was capering on the stage in her dazzling frock, but it sounded better in the papers to give her an escort of six. They were a formidable-looking crew, wearing slouch hats and armed with sawed-off shot-guns, and it would be a bold band of robbers who would dare to try to snatch the jeweled dress from under the noses of such a convoy.

Wray had turned with a faintly humorous expression to size up the six

detective guards, ranged solemnly in line by the outer doorway, when he heard voices and caught a sound of footsteps in the marble foyer beyond. A woman, accompanied by two men, appeared in the doorway, and, after a word with the sentinels, the three were admitted to the steel-walled anteroom opening off the vault.

The woman was muffled almost to the eyes in a long ermine wrap. She was slim, almost lean in figure, and even the draping furs failed to conceal her sinuous grace of body as she moved across the threshold.

"Mademoiselle!" said Wray under his breath, and then aloud: "Mademoiselle Marat, this is Miss Lester."

The woman acknowledged the introduction with a gracious bow, and, with a quick, pantherlike contortion of her shoulder, she indicated the man who strode in at her heels. "My 'osband, Julius Marat," she said in a low, husky voice.

Marat was a colossus of a man, a full head taller than Wray, and built like a wrestler. He was entirely bald, but made up for the lack of hair on his head by wearing a full beard and a fierce, bristling mustache. Twisting up the waxed ends of the mustache, he bent himself nearly double before Neila Lester; then he turned and offered a huge, plump paw for the publicity man to shake.

"Pefore ve dance, ve first see de dress," he said emphatically. "If ve like de dress, ve put him on and go to vork. Not oddervise!"

"There's the costume," said Wray. "Look it over and see if you want to put it on."

The invitation, however, was not needed. The dancer had seen the strands of precious stones hanging from Neila Lester's arm, and even in the dimly lighted room the opulent fringes looked like a cascade of shimmering fire.

"*Bee-oo-tee-ful!*" Mademoiselle Marat took a running step forward, and her slim, olive-brown hands dabbled feverishly among the gems. She crooned over the dress in soft ecstasy.

Wray turned a slantwise glance toward Neila Lester and repressed a laugh at the expressive look the girl flashed back at him. He swung about, grave and polite, to face the dancer's husband-manager. "I'll assume we'll wear it, won't we?" he inquired.

Marat shrugged ponderously, as though million-dollar gowns were casual items in his life. "Ve vill," he agreed.

The second of mademoiselle's companions had remained standing silently in the doorway. A round little man in evening clothes, with a chubby face and big, artless eyes, he beamed on the scene in a pleased, half-apologizing way, as though he were proud to be in the room and thought it very generous of the others to let him come. He was Samuel McCabe, junior partner of McAllister & McCabe, who owned the jeweled gown.

"She—miss—the lady can put it on inside the vault," he volunteered breathlessly. "We have put a mirror and a table and special lights in there for mademoiselle—for miss—for her to dress by."

Mademoiselle Marat had arrived at the jewelers' vaults in her full stage make-up, and she had only to slip into the frock to be ready for the theater. In view of the extraordinary value of the costume, the Marats had agreed that no ordinary lady's maid should be allowed to touch it. Neila Lester was intrusted with the responsibility of helping the dancer to change.

"Come on," invited the jewelry expert, and the two young women retired into the vault. In an incredibly short while they came forth again from behind the ponderous doors, and the dancer was clad in her million-dollar costume.

If any woman on earth could carry off

such a gown, it surely was Mademoiselle Magya Marat. Her strange, barbaric beauty was like a flame that was not to be dimmed, even by the glittering strands of pearls and rubies and diamonds that streamed down from her armpits to her knees. She flashed into the dingy room adjoining the vault, twined her thin, brown arms above her head in a gesture of sensuous delight, whirled on the points of her two toes, dipped in a swift curtsy, and laughed in sheer excitement.

The six guardsmen in the doorway turned suddenly into so many spell-bound, pop-eyed statues. Little Samuel McAbe stood with his mouth wide open, gazing in foolish wonder, as a man who finds it hard to believe his own vision. Even the whiskered face of Julius Marat evinced symptoms of approval.

Of the nine men in the room, Bob Wray alone failed to accord Mademoiselle Marat his breathless and undivided attention. He had looked at her once as she came from the vault, and then, for no explainable reason, his glance had wandered toward Neila Lester, who stood, faintly smiling, in the steel-framed doorway.

There was nothing bizarre or exotic about Neila Lester. She was one-hundred-per-cent Manhattanese, a trim-built, rather boyish figure, clad modestly but modestly in the simplest sort of a straight-lined, unadorned frock. Her ruddy brown hair was bobbed, and it strayed in rebellious tendrils above her ears. Her eyes were of a clearest, deepest blue, frank and friendly, full of life and merriment, profound with understanding. A ghost of a dimple lurked at the corner of her mobile lips.

As Wray faced her across the actress' bare shoulder, it occurred to him that for honest value received Neila Lester was better worth looking at than even Mademoiselle Marat in her million-dollar dress.

Samuel McAbe was holding the

dancer's ermine wrap, and with a lithe movement she slipped her arms through the sleeves and drew the high collar about her chin.

Wray glanced at his watch. "All right," he said; "let's go."

With the assistance of two detective guards, McAbe closed the vault doors and set the bolts to open again at the time of the party's expected return. Then they all trooped out of the strong room, passed through the rear corridor behind the jewelry firm's offices, locking various doors behind them, and then left the building by way of a little-used side exit.

Waiting for them by the curb stood a parked motor vehicle of a most peculiar appearance. It was a long, gray-painted automobile, built something like an ambulance, but sheathed solidly in bullet-proof steel, with narrow loopholes for windows. The car was the property of the Metropolitan Protective-Detective Agency and ordinarily was used to transport bullion and jewelry shipments in the Wall Street and Maiden Lane districts.

Defended by her shotgun escort, Mademoiselle Marat probably would have been safe enough driving to the theater in a plain taxicab. But Bob Wray was never one to do things by halves. An armored car would draw attention on the streets and so contribute to the public interest in the dancer and her costume. The banditproof car was chartered for all matinée and evening trips back and forth from McAllister & McAbe's vaults.

Hemmed in by a double cordon of her guardsmen, Mademoiselle Marat was assisted up the rear step of the automobile and passed into its fortified tonneau. Her husband-manager scrambled in after her, and Neila Lester and Wray followed. Then three of the shotgun men entered the stuffy inclosure, and the car held its quota of passengers.

"See you at the theater!" called Mc-

Abe, peering wistfully from the sidewalk. The jewelry dealer's limousine was parked around the corner, and as there was no room for him in the armored car, he moved away reluctantly to make the trip to the theater alone.

Meanwhile a fourth detective had clambered to the front seat beside the chauffeur; the two remaining jumped to the rear step, where they were to stand as guards.

"Ready?" asked one of them.

"All right!" said Wray.

The rear doors clanged shut, and one of the inside men shot home the massive bolt. The driver let in his gears, and the heavy car lurched forward with loudly humming engine. Mademoiselle Marat was on her way to the theater in her million-dollar dress.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT.

THE armored car was not constructed for the comfort of its occupants. There were two bench seats, unpadded and straight backed, facing each other and extending the length of the coffin-like inclosure. With the end doors closed and locked, the seven passengers were sealed in like so many fish in a hermetically soldered can.

Meager ventilation was afforded by three slotted vents, just wide enough for gun muzzles to go through, one on each side, and a third piercing the steel panel behind the driver's seat. The bare, confined space within was illuminated by a single ceiling light, harshly glaring against the dull metal walls.

As far as the seven shut-in travelers knew, the journey to the theater was accomplished without incident. By the increasing tumult of traffic they realized when they had passed out of the quiet neighborhoods of shops to enter the crowded theatrical district. Brilliant lights flashed past the loopholes and they could hear voices and the roar of

"L" trains and the tramp of slow-moving throngs. The chauffeur drove fast, seldom slackening speed, and it was apparent that crossing policemen recognized him and good-humoredly waved him the right of way.

For a long stretch they bowled onward through noisy, teeming thoroughfares, but at last the car lurched sharply around a corner and ran down a darker, quieter side street. A second turning was made; they jounced along for a distance over cobblestones, and then the brakes grated, and the vehicle suddenly was brought to a standstill.

"Here y'are!" somebody called from outside.

One of the inside guards fumbled with the bolt and flung open the steel doors. The passengers of the armored car got up from their hard benches and started to file out thankfully from their cramped quarters.

They found themselves parked at the mouth of a gloomy, badly lighted alley. Before them loomed raw brick walls of shadowy substance, towering into blackness overhead. The car had backed against a sidewalk, and in the semidarkness rows of vague human faces might be seen, staring toward the open doors. As might have been expected, a crowd of curiosity seekers had gathered at the back portals of the theater to watch mademoiselle go to work.

The two rear guards were already engaged in a shoving contest with the gawky onlookers, and in a moment their comrades reinforced them. "Come on now! Stand back! Make a hole through here!"

The six detectives were rude and lusty men, and they shouldered into the jam without caring whose ribs were thumped or toes trod upon. In a minute or two the crowd was split apart, and a broad lane had been opened into the alley entrance.

Wray and Neila Lester had descended to the sidewalk, and Julius Marat lum-

bered down the step after them. Mademoiselle Marat tripped forth blithely behind her husband's screening bulk. But as her agile foot touched the pavement, a slightly built, dapper-clothed young man suddenly broke past the guards and proffered something that looked like a large bouquet of violets.

"For mademoi—" he started to say, but got no further.

Marat cuffed out with one hamlike arm, and at the same instant an elbow of one of the detectives caught the gallant youth amidship, and he stumbled back spinning, still clutching his flowers.

"Behave now!" admonished the guard. "Be pretty, can't you?"

Mademoiselle Marat's escort closed about her and, with two armed men striding in advance, two acting as flankers, and two bringing up the rear, a path was breasted for her through the crowd. She was swathed from mouth to ankles in her ermines, and if any of the spectators had hoped to catch a glimpse of the jeweled dress, they were destined to disappointment.

The dancer's party trooped down the dismal alley, turned to the right past a dark areaway, turned to the left behind a buttressing wall of brick, filed groping through a dark passageway, with shrouded window embrasures opening on either side, and arrived at last before a big, sliding door, under a shaded electric light. After a brief parley the doorkeeper admitted them, and they passed into the hot, musty precincts behind the Curtain Theater stage.

Wray now took the lead and piloted his companions between groups of loitering performers and scene shifters, through a maze of hanging drops and stacked box seats, to the olio entrance at the right of the stage.

A singing comedienne, the next-to-closing act, held the stage at the moment. The young woman had gone into her final number, and was just finishing the last crooning chorus, when Made-

moiselle Marat and her bodyguard took their station in the wings. Through the half-open doorway it was possible to see a triangular section of the packed auditorium, with rows and rows of faces turned toward the footlights.

The comedienne wound up her song in a burst of wailing melody and came off, laughing and holding her sides. A perfunctory patter of handclapping followed her through the door, and she might easily have stretched her applause to the extent of two or three bows, but she had caught sight of Mademoiselle Marat and, no doubt for the first time in her career, she forgot her audience. She stopped dead and stared at the dancer, while the stage manager, in his turn, stared at the comedienne.

"Well, for the love of Pete!" gasped the czar of the back stage. "She don't hear 'em!"

The man recovered from his astonishment quickly enough to motion the curtain down on the faltering round of applause, and then he turned curtly to Julius Marat, who stood beside his wife, holding her discarded ermines.

"You follow and close the show," the manager jerked out. "Shoot when you're ready."

"Ve're ready," returned Marat.

"Lights!" called the manager. "Black the borders! Now!"

From behind the curtain they heard the orchestra crash into mademoiselle's overture. The curtain went up with a soft, whistling sound, and the dancer stretched to her tiptoes and poised herself with tensing muscles. Then the music cue came, and Mademoiselle Magya Marat glided forward into the view of the audience.

Wray had drawn Neila Lester forward into the wing, whence they could see the stage and a part of the house beyond. They heard a sound like a sighing breath sweep across the great auditorium and saw the tiers of faces grow rigid with attention.

No glaring spotlight searched out the lean, bronzed figure of the dancer. The footlights were dimmed. A couple of pale-blue bunch lamps softened and mellowed the seeping border rays. Two modified "baby spots" played from the trough upon mademoiselle's glittering costume.

On the program the dance was called *Ignis Fatuus*, which means, literally, "foolish light." Mademoiselle was the pretended embodiment of the miasmatic fire which hovers above churchyards at night and which, superstitious people once believed, lured moonstruck travelers to destruction. The woman was the mocking flame, the elusive will-o'-the-wisp, beckoning with cruel allure, seeking, yet always fleeing, dancing to death with folly madly pursuing.

Wray had seen mademoiselle perform in theaters abroad, but as he watched her now with critical interest he realized that she excelled herself on this occasion. She was like a weirdly glowing radiance flitting here and there in the mellow twilight, weaving and gyrating in rhythm with the orchestra, and scarcely seeming to touch foot to the floor.

From the dancer Wray's glance wandered out across the footlights where the audience sat in spellbound silence. Virtually every person in the audience was caught in the magic of mademoiselle's art. But there was one conspicuous exception. In the center aisle stood a young man who seemed to be involved in some sort of argument with one of the ushers. He was gesticulating with one hand, and in the other he held a bouquet of flowers.

Wray stared for an instant and then touched Neila Lester's elbow. "That looks like the chap with the violets who tried to crash the guards at the stage door," he whispered.

The girl drew a long breath and looked up with dreamy, half-closed eyes. "I take back what I said about the dress,"

she said in a low voice. "It—it's just startling, when Mademoiselle Magya wears it. She—she's wonderful!"

"That's partly the effects of the lights and music and the scenic background," said Wray. "Theatrical claptrap. 'Showmanship' we call it." He watched the dancer's gliding figure for a moment and smiled. "She isn't so bad, though," he conceded.

"What about the man with the violets?" Neila Lester asked.

"He's trying to persuade the usher to take them to the stage. But she won't do it. The house employees have strict orders that nobody is to approach mademoiselle, even to give her flowers across the footlights."

"He's persistent," said the girl.

"Some smitten Villager," observed Wray cynically. "There're always a few of them hanging around the theater."

As he spoke, the man abandoned his arguments with the usher and went back up the aisle, to retire somewhere in the gloom at the rear of the house.

Mademoiselle Marat's dance lasted without break or rest for the ten minutes of her allotted time. Starting in a soft, minor key, the music grew brighter and became faster and faster in tempo. The dancer flashed back and forth on twinkling feet, a luminous streak afloat in the air, the lines of her figure melting in fluid cadences of movement. She was like a disembodied creature, glistening with light, chance-drifted waves of melody.

The woman abandoned herself to the quickening beat of the music, flitting from one end of the stage to the other, her lean arms and body yielding in rippling, effortless movements, as though she were borne on gossamer wings. The orchestra at last crashed into a wild finale. Mademoiselle ended her dance in a series of spinning evolutions and finished with a triple pirouette on the tip of one toe, a bit of terpsi-

chorean gymnastics which, it was said, she alone of all dancers, had ever succeeded in mastering.

With a thunderous outburst of applause rolling after her, Mademoiselle Marat fled from the stage and flung herself into the wings, panting for breath.

"Congratulations!" said Wray. "You were magnificent."

Mademoiselle flashed him a dazzling smile.

"Go make your bows, quick," commanded her husband, "'fore dey tear up de seats."

The dancer glided back into the subdued light of the stage and bent forward until her forehead almost touched the floor; but when she ran off again the storm of handclapping followed her like the crashing of surf. Again and again she was forced to make her curtsies over the footlights. She kissed her fingers and held out her thin arms in embracing gestures, as though she would like to have taken two thousand people to her heart; and the applause grew even more deafening. The curtain lifted and dropped a dozen times before the audience reluctantly consented to let mademoiselle retire for the night.

Marat was waiting with the ermine wrap, and when his wife came off for the last time he helped her to slip into the garment. She drew the collar about her chin and then caught at the man's beefy arm to steady herself.

Wray beckoned to the watchful detectives. "Ready!" he said. "Let's get out of here."

The escort formed again, three armed men leading the way, three falling into position as rear guard. Wray and Neila Lester caught step behind the advance trio, and Mademoiselle Marat and her husband followed just behind them. The party passed among knots of interested onlookers and left the theater by way of the stage door.

Filing through the dark passageway outside, they passed between the abut-

ting walls of the neighboring buildings and presently trooped forth into the mouth of the alley, where their armored car was waiting.

A larger crowd than before was jammed along the sidewalk, straining for a single glimpse of Mademoiselle Marat. However, the guardsmen quickly butted a way through. The dancer was clinging to her husband's arm. But Marat evidently did not care about being jostled by strangers. The moment they reached the doorstep of the automobile he shook himself free and hoisted his bulk into the car.

One of the detectives was on the point of helping Mademoiselle Marat to mount the step behind her manager-husband, when there was a sudden surging movement in the packed line of spectators, and a young man, dressed sprucely in a fawn-colored suit, thrust his way to the forefront of the crowd and held out a big bunch of violets.

It was the bouquet-bearing youth, who, twice before, had tried to present flowers to mademoiselle.

This time the dancer looked him full in the face, and all at once she showed white teeth in a brilliant smile.

"Please!" begged the intruder. "Won't you take these?"

Mademoiselle Marat's brown hand reached forward, and she accepted the bouquet. Then she touched her fingers to her lips, laughed, and climbed into the car.

The detective pushed the young man aside and made room for Neila to follow the dancer. "Know who that is—the Johnny with the posies?" he whispered in Wray's ear. "I thought I knew him before, and this time I got a good slant at his phiz."

"Who?"

"He's 'Dapper Dan' McGee, the slickest dip in town," the detective replied. "He could steal your hands right out of your pants pockets, and you'd never guess he'd done it!"

"Oh, ho!" said Wray under his breath. "So that's it!"

"He figured the flowers might get him close enough to the lady so's he could nip him a couple of diamonds or so. But we're one too sharp for him." The detective grinned as he followed Wray into the car. "With us on the job, nobody's going to lay a finger on that dress—not if every crook and bandit in town was to try. There ain't a chanct."

CHAPTER III.

IN SUDDEN DARKNESS.

AS they had done on the occasion of their trip to the theater, three of the detectives took seats inside the armored automobile, a fourth sprang up beside the driver, and the remaining two men stood on the rear step. The guardsmen jumped to their positions with the quickness and precision of a drilled squad of soldiers. Simultaneously the crowd of onlookers surged forward, but the steel doors slammed shut in their gaping faces, and the heavy bolt was thrust into its socket.

Mademoiselle Magya and Marat sat side by side in the front end of the bulletproof inclosure, while Neila Lester and Wray occupied the bench opposite, crowding the knees of the dancer and her husband in the narrow aisle. The three inside guards packed themselves as best they might in the cramped space that was left at the rear of the compartment.

The dancer had relaxed against Marat's shoulder, and she sat in the glare of the ceiling light with her head drooping and her eyes closed. Apparently she was tired out after the strain of her evening's performance.

The driver started the car the moment he heard the door shut, and they pulled away from the alley and rolled down the dark side street. They turned to the left, ran for a distance over rough cobbles, and then a second turning

brought them into an asphalt-paved boulevard where lights flickered past the loopholes and heavy traffic boomed about the car.

Mademoiselle's bunch of violets had fallen from her listless hand, and Marat, who sat in moody silence beside her, had planted his big foot on the bouquet and, intentionally or not, was crushing the delicate blossoms. The guards had nothing to say to anybody and took turns peering out through the loopholes into the lighted streets. Wray and Neila Lester were the only ones of the party who seemed to find anything to talk about, but they kept their voices discreetly lowered, as though hesitating to disturb their companions.

The car was traveling fast, running across town somewhere between the middle Forties. Unless they glued their eyes to the loopholes, the occupants of the stuffy tonneau could not know their whereabouts, except that the lights and sounds outside told them they were in the theatrical district and that the audiences were leaving the playhouses. They could hear taxi horns blowing, the clangor of trolley gongs, the murmur of hundreds of voices, laughing and talking.

The armored automobile was jolting across a network of street-car tracks when all at once, without warning or apparent reason, the dome light in the ceiling flickered and went out, leaving the interior compartment in absolute darkness. At the same instant the car checked speed, as though the brakes had been applied, and the engine stopped working.

A piercing scream reëchoed through the armored inclosure of the car. "Help! Oh, don't! Oh!"

It was the voice of Mademoiselle Marat, startled, protesting, shrill with terror.

Wray stumbled to his feet in amazement, his eyes vainly trying to pierce the suffocating darkness. Mademoiselle

was in the forward corner of the car, on the opposite side of the aisle. He started to grope in her direction, but blundered into a huge bulk that had just heaved itself up from the seat across the way. Marat it was, presumably, moving blindly, without stopping to remember that the quarters were too cramped for sudden and violent action.

The two men collided heavily, and each fell back breathless against his side of the steel coop.

"Magya!" gasped Marat. "Vat is't?" "Let go!" The dancer shrieked again in the darkness. "Stop! You're choking——"

A confusion of sounds drowned the rest of her half-throttled speech. Heavy feet scuffled on the steel floor, a reckless fist struck down the aisle, somebody kicked out at random and caught Wray in the shin. The next instant he was crushed back against the seat by a press of surging bodies.

He felt Neila Lester's yielding weight as he crowded her into her narrow corner. With a sharp lunge he swung himself around and spread his arms to shield her from the huddle of struggling bodies behind them. As he whirled, his elbow jabbed into a hollow, bony substance, which he fancied might be somebody's eye socket.

He was not sure, however. He had not the faintest idea what really had happened. Men were behind him, pushing, grunting, clawing with their hands. Marat and the three detective guards were mixed in a blind mêlée, trampling one another's toes and blocking each other in their efforts to reach the front of the car where mademoiselle had cried for help.

"Stop it!" shouted Wray as he arched his back and braced himself above Neila Lester. "Somebody—give us a light!"

"Yeh!" answered a muffled voice behind him. "Light! Here y'are!"

A thin white beam from a pocket electric suddenly searched the length

of the tonneau. One of the guards had snapped the button of his lamp. Wray craned his head in staring amazement. Two of the guards and Marat were locked together like players grappling in a football scrimmage, and between their swaying shoulders he saw Mademoiselle Magya.

The dancer was seated on the floor, hemmed in by the struggling men. Her black hair had fallen in a wild tangle about her face, her cheek was scratched, bleeding, and there were angry red marks on either side of her bare throat, that might have been left there by throttling fingers. The ermine wrap had been torn from her body and lay in tatters at her feet. She was clad in nothing but a blue-silk slip. The million-dollar dress had vanished.

CHAPTER IV.

BY HANDS UNSEEN.

IN blank and speechless wonder Wray stared at the figure on the floor. The woman looked up with bewildered eyes, sobbing hysterically, with sharp, choking breaths.

Marat was the first to find his power of speech. "Magya!" he demanded hoarsely. "De dress! Vere is de dress, Magya?"

The guards discovered suddenly that they had been wrestling with one another in the darkness, and they broke off hostilities with such abruptness that each was caught in the awkward and ludicrous posture of the instant, when movement ceased. They held themselves rigid, gazing in stupefaction at Mademoiselle Marat.

Wray passed his hand over his eyes and turned from the dancer to glance about the banditproof tonneau. The detective with the lamp moved the bull's-eye of light back and forth along the steel walls. The rear door was shut, its massive bolt still securely fastened.

The seven original passengers oc-

cupied the tonneau of the armored car, all crowded together at the front—the three guardsmen, Marat and his wife, Neila Lester, and Wray himself. There was no one else; no evidence of intrusion. But Mademoiselle Marat sat among her torn ermines, her face and neck and shoulder's bearing the marks of brutal hands, and the jeweled dress was gone.

Wray peered along the benches and under the benches and around the four bare walls. He caught a sparkle on the floor and stooped to pick up a loose diamond, a small, white stone of about a carat's weight. Presumably it had been jerked from the fringe of the gown. But it was left behind as a solitary exhibit. The glittering frock, with its magnificent trimming of diamonds and pearls and rubies, was nowhere visible.

With his eyes grown suddenly hard, Wray swung around to confront his companions. "That dress can't possibly have been taken from this car," he asserted. "We're all in this, locked up together. That door stays locked; nobody leaves until the police come!"

He looked down at mademoiselle. "Where's the dress?" he demanded. "What happened to you?"

The woman stirred and with a dazed gesture passed her hand from her shoulder down over the slip she was wearing. Then she reached uncertainly to the floor, picked up what was left of her wrap, and drew the fragments of fur about her.

"Some one attacked me!" she cried. "Stripped off my ermine! Ah, look—tore my lovely coat to bits! And while I try to fight, they rip my dress in two pieces!" She jerked her hands apart in excited illustration. "So it was done! The straps broke over my arms. And the next thing I find myself thrown on the floor with my dress taken from me!"

"But, Magya!" expostulated Marat,

his big face grown stupid with a child-like perplexity. "How could dat be? Nobody could do it."

The woman turned in a flash of anger. "You think they couldn't, eh? But they have! See!" She drew the collar of ermine apart and displayed a red streak across her shoulder where the skin was broken. "I was cut here when the wire snapped—the wire that held the jewels. And look here, where I was choked." She stretched back her throat to exhibit the darkly bruised imprints, which unquestionably had been left there by clutching fingers. "What you think now, eh?" she demanded passionately. "You think maybe somebody did this to me?"

Marat was clearly flabbergasted and wisely decided to hold his tongue.

"It was some one very strong," declared Mademoiselle Marat—"some one with terrible hands—stronger than me or you."

The automobile had come to a stop near some busy street intersection where traffic rumbled back and forth. Wray was aware that they were standing still, and from the sounds outside he knew that a crowd was beginning to gather. The guards on the outer step were pounding on the bolted door, demanding to know what had happened within the car.

"Call a policeman!" Wray shouted, without offering to open the door. He forced his way to the front of the car and looked through the loophole, behind the chauffeur's seat. The shotgun guard and the driver were bending forward over the dash, investigating the instrument board.

"What's wrong there?" Wray asked.

"Don't know yet," one of the men called back. "Engine died on us, just as we were crossing the trolley tracks."

The hammering on the rear door was growing more insistent, and loud voices clamored for admittance. "This is Lieutenant Dean, Twenty-sixth Pre-

cinct," announced some one invisible. "Open up here!"

Wray shot back the bolt, shoved his shoulder against the creaking doors, and swung them wide. Outside under the street lights he saw three or four patrolmen trying to disperse a crowd of curiosity seekers. The two shotgun postilions stood on guard by the rear steps, flanking a uniformed man who wore the white cap of a police commander.

"Come in, lieutenant," Wray invited. "You know who we are, don't you?"

"Ought to," was the ironic reply. "I read the newspapers now and then. What's happened to you?"

"Mademoiselle Marat has been robbed of her jeweled dress; that's all. Stolen right off her back."

Lieutenant Dean vaulted up the steps, produced his pocket lamp, and flashed a light down the armored tonneau. Then he turned to size up Wray with a skeptical grin. "Come on, now!" he reproved. "Don't clown the department. Some more publicity stuff, eh?"

Wray faced the policeman earnestly. "It's no fake," he asserted. "Get that idea out of your head. Mademoiselle was on her way back to McAllister & McAbe's vaults, wearing a million dollars' worth of jewels. And they've disappeared."

"She sitting dere in her tress, an' de car all locked up tight," put in Marat. "Den, queek like dat, de light go out, de car stop, my wife, she scream somebody is grabbing off her tress. An' now look—look what happen to her! Magya, de officer vants to look."

Without a word mademoiselle pulled open her bedraggled cloak, and the lieutenant stared at her with blinking eyes. However much of the story he was beginning to believe, he at least could be certain that the dancer was no longer wearing her jeweled costume.

"Who choked her?" he demanded, and pushed his way forward, his glance

fixed on the woman's throat. "You don't fool me on finger marks. I've seen too many of them come into the station." He gazed curiously at Marat's hamlike hands. "Hum!" he muttered and turned grimly to face the dancer again. "Those prints are the work of a number-twelve mitt. Some big boy put them there." The policeman was making no secret of his private conclusions.

Wray, however, hastened to interrupt. "Just a moment, lieutenant," he said. "Marat was seated across the aisle from me. When the light was snuffed out and his wife screamed we both jumped to our feet and bumped into each other in the darkness. He wasn't choking her, didn't have a chance to do so. There wasn't time. We might as well face facts and start fair."

"All right," returned the policeman gruffly. "I'm only saying she was choked by somebody—somebody with a whopping pair of paws." He glanced over his shoulder at the loopholes in the steel side panels of the car. "Those slits aren't wide enough for anybody to have stuck an arm through from outside, even if anybody could have run along with you while you were traveling."

"I know they aren't," agreed Wray.

Lieutenant Dean cast a lowering glance toward the three detective guards. "Well," he asked after a pause, "then what?"

"I'd say that when we find the dress, we'll know who choked Mademoiselle Magya."

"No kidding, now?" said the lieutenant abruptly. "This happened just as you said? No phony stuff for the press? You're on the level about it?"

"Absolutely on the level," returned Wray soberly.

"You mean that dress was snatched off the lady by some one—you don't know whom?"

"She was wearing the frock—she

isn't wearing it now. You've seen for yourself."

"These lost stones are real—no just theater paste to make a flash for the saps?"

Wray glanced around at Neila Lester, who had remained sitting in her corner, a silent and anxious listener. "Lieutenant Dean, this is Miss Lester, a diamond expert for the firm of McAllister & McAbe, who own the gown."

"They're genuine stones, taken from stock," the girl said quietly. "Their value is easily a million dollars."

"You're sure the dress isn't still in the car?" said the officer after a reflective interval.

Wray held out the diamond he had picked up from the floor. "I searched, and this was all I found. It must have been pulled off the fringe."

The lieutenant leaned forward to look. "Is that a genuine diamond?" he asked.

Neila Lester took the stone in her slim fingers, turned it in the light, and nodded. "Yes," she said.

"From the dress?"

"There were two thousand stones similar to this," the girl answered. "All about the same weight and trade value. While I couldn't positively identify this diamond, I believe it's one of the lot."

"Let's look around here a minute," suggested the policeman. "Maybe we'll find something else."

With his light in hand he proceeded to examine the interior of the car. He searched along the steel benches, top side and underneath, and inspected every inch of the armored inclosure, the floor, ceiling, and the four metal walls.

"All right!" he remarked at last when he finished his investigations. "The seven of you were shut in here. No openings whatever, excepting the loopholes and the back door. Was the door closed all the time?"

"From the time we left the theater until we opened up to let you in," vol-

unteered one of the detective guards. "You heard the noise the bolt makes and how the hinges squeak. If that door had been opened on the trip over here we all would have known it."

"Nobody entered or left the car, then? Nobody been in here except the seven of you?"

"Nobody that we know of."

"You're from the Protective-Detective Agency, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so," said the lieutenant in an accusing tone, as though he had ferreted out some sort of crime. He turned again to Wray. "Could the dress have been pulled out through one of the loopholes?" he asked.

"Impossible!" returned the publicity man. "Even if it were folded or twisted lengthwise, there would be too much thickness to stuff through those narrow slits."

"Suppose it had been torn into strips, or the fringes of stones were taken off?"

"There wasn't time for that," put in Neila Lester. "The trimming was woven in and out of the dress material with a meshing of thin, steel wires. It would be a lengthy task to cut or tear the frock to pieces."

"Then the dress must still be in the car." The officer slanted a quizzical glance at Wray. "That your opinion?" he inquired mildly.

"If it's here we've failed to find it. That's as much as I can tell you." Wray shrugged his shoulders. "There's but one thing left to be done. I'm sure that everybody here will insist on being searched, before he's allowed to leave the car."

CHAPTER V.

LIKE CINDERELLA'S GOWN.

THERE was a stirring among the occupants of the car, a fleeting exchange of glances; but no one had any objection to offer to Wray's proposal. Lieutenant Dean surveyed the group

with a grim tightening of his lips and coolly nodded.

"We'll start with you three," he announced, surveying the Protective-Detective guards. Then he turned for an instant toward Neila Lester and Mademoiselle Marat. "I was called over here on a hotel case with one of our police matrons," he remarked. "That's how I happened along at this moment. The matron is waiting at the corner now in my car. I'll frisk the men here first, and then the matron can come in, if we still need her, and finish the snooping."

He stuck his head out of the door and spoke to a patrolman who was helping to keep the crowd back. "Charley, send Mrs. Gray here," he ordered.

Swinging on his heel, he beckoned to the nearest guardsman. "I have no right to do this unless you're willing," he remarked.

"Go ahead, lieutenant!" the other returned.

The man lifted his arms and stood motionless while the policeman searched his person with quick, skilled hands.

An object as bulky as the diamond dress would be impossible to conceal under one's clothing, but nevertheless the lieutenant searched as thoroughly as though he were looking for individual diamonds instead of an entire jeweled costume.

"So far so good," he announced at length. "You're clean. Step outside."

"Next!" he called.

The second and third guardsmen submitted to the search, but the missing frock was not produced. As the pair shouldered their shotguns and left the car, the officer turned toward Marat.

The husband-manager yielded himself to official hands, as the three others had done, without a word of protest. In his case the frisking process seemed needlessly prolonged, and the policeman appeared to be a trifle nettled when he finished the search.

"All right," he conceded at last. "You haven't got it. Climb outside."

Wray was the last of the men to stand before the officer, and after a brief prodding and thumbing-over, he, too, was absolved from suspicion. He descended the rear steps, and the lieutenant followed him, leaving Neila Lester and Mademoiselle Marat alone in the car.

As the two men reached the pavement somebody forced a passage through the throng of staring people along the sidewalk, and an elderly woman stepped down across the curb.

The lieutenant motioned to her. "Mrs. Gray," he said in an undertone, "it's reported that a jeweled dress has been stolen from that car. I haven't found it. But there are two ladies waiting in there. Go inside and see if either of them has it."

While the police matron was mounting the step, Wray sauntered forward to talk with the front-seat guard. His questions, however, elicited no information of any importance. The man stated merely that they were driving along at a fast rate of speed, with the engine running smoothly, when all at once, without any warning, the power was cut off, and the car stopped. It happened while they were traveling down Forty-second Street, just after they crossed the trolley tracks under the Sixth Avenue Elevated structure. At the time, the man said, there was no other automobile nor any pedestrian passing near them. Before his vehicle had lost momentum, the driver had steered alongside the right-hand curb and pulled up in the middle of the block, not far from the Public Library building.

The chauffeur at that moment was standing in the street, peering under the lifted hood of his engine. Apparently he had not yet discovered the trouble. While he talked with the guard, Wray experimentally pushed his hand down on the foot-starter switch. There was

no response from the battery. Evidently something was wrong with the electrical system.

Stooping under the car, he felt along the main cable until he reached the battery. The connection seemed to be tight. He tried the opposite terminal, running his hand down the ground cable. Then he suddenly called to the chauffeur. "Here you are," he said.

"What?" asked the man, moving back his direction.

"Your ground's been pulled loose from the chassis frame," he replied, and as the chauffeur stooped to look he exhibited the dangling end of the cable.

"Now how do you suppose that was done?" the driver wanted to know.

Wray showed him a fragment of stout wire, twisted around the terminal and broken off short at its free end. "Looks as though it had been jerked off by this—purposely, I should say."

"Huh!" ejaculated the chauffeur.

Wray stood up with thoughtfully knitted brow, pushed his way through the circling crowd, and started to walk down the street, trying to trace back the wheel marks of the armored car. He watched right and left along the pavement as he made his way down to the Sixth Avenue crossing. Reaching the intersection of street-car tracks, he halted for a moment to glance about him, and then, with a triumphant exclamation, he darted forward to stoop down in the middle of the highway. From the trolley slot in the middle of the track, there trailed a half-coiled length of stout wire.

The wire was caught in the slot and refused to give at the first couple of tugs, but at last Wray managed to worry it loose and pulled up a three-pronged steel barb, shaped like a triple fishhook. With a comprehending nod, he turned back and hurriedly retraced his steps to the stalled automobile.

As Wray reëntered the cleared space

inside the police line, Neila Lester appeared in the doorway of the armored car and stepped down to the street.

He hastened to her side. "Well?" he inquired under his breath.

The girl faced him with a troubled smile and slowly shook her head. "Neither Mademoiselle Magya nor I had the dress," she said. "The matron has searched us both. The frock is not in the car. It—it just seems to have faded out of existence."

"Queer, isn't it?" remarked Lieutenant Dean, coming forward to hear what was said. "We're up against an impossible business—something that just couldn't happen. You've certainly pulled a new one this time."

"Not so new," remarked Wray. "Remember when Cinderella came home from the dance—how her gorgeous gown was whisked away, leaving her standing in her rags?"

"So that's it!" said the officer tartly. "Just another fairy tale for the newspapers, eh?" He glowered indignantly. "You wasting my time——"

"I've told you the truth—on my word of honor," Wray cut in. "Mademoiselle Marat was wearing a dress worth a million dollars, and it has been stolen. Impossible or not, it has happened exactly as I have told you."

Lieutenant Dean fixed the publicity man with a searching glance, apparently impressed by his manner, yet still a bit skeptical. "You've given me the full facts?" he asked at last.

"Here's something that I've just discovered." Wray held up the wire with the terminating hook. "This is what caused the car to stop."

"What do you mean?"

"I picked this up on the Sixth Avenue trolley tracks, with the fingers of the hook caught in the slot. A broken fragment of this wire is still twisted around the ground cable leading from the battery of the armored automobile. You can see what happened. The hook

was dangling from the cable, dragging free on the pavements as the car traveled. It was certain to snag something before the trip ended. As we know now, it must have dragged harmlessly for several blocks, but at last got jammed in the trolley slot as we crossed the intersecting tracks back there. When the hook caught, of course, the cable was yanked loose, and the electric circuit was broken."

The lieutenant examined the broken strand of wire. "Then you think some one fastened it to the battery cable purposely?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"When was it done?"

"While the car was parked at the stage entrance, presumably. The guards all accompanied mademoiselle into the theater. It was very dark at the alley entrance. Anybody could have crept under the car, fastened the hook to the cable, and then slipped away unseen."

The policeman summoned the driver of the car. "Where were you while you were waiting for your party to come out of the theater?" he asked.

"In my seat behind the wheel," was the answer.

"Could anybody have crawled under your car without your noticing?"

"They might have," the chauffeur admitted. "It was too dark to see much, and I wasn't paying attention to anybody, not figuring there was any need of keeping my eyes open until the lady came out again."

Lieutenant Dean dismissed the man and turned again to Wray. "We'll say it was done like that. With what object? To stop the car?"

The publicity man shook his head. "To put out the light, I'd say at a guess. We were riding along peacefully in the illuminated tonneau. Then, as we crossed the tracks, there came sudden darkness. Simultaneously, mademoiselle screamed for help. What happened in that interval, nobody was able

to see. But when a pocket torch was ignited at last, mademoiselle sat in the corner, bruised and crumpled, and minus her dress."

"How long did the darkness last?"

"There was too much confusion to think of the passage of time. It might have been only a few seconds, or perhaps there was a lapse of a minute or more."

"It must have been longer than we supposed," put in Neila Lester. "The dress was securely fastened, and it certainly would have taken more than a minute for anybody to tear it off."

"To me the startling feature of it all is the fact that the thief or thieves were ready to act at an instant's notice," said Wray. "They could be sure that the electric cable would be yanked loose some time during the trip, but they couldn't anticipate the exact second it would happen. As far as we know there could have been no intruder in the car; but the instant the light goes out we seem to have an invisible some one with us, some one who's been waiting for just that moment, waiting for his chance to dig fingers in Magya's throat and snatch off her costume. Queer, isn't it?" Wray grinned ruefully, and shook his head. "Maybe there's some way of figuring it out, but it's certainly got me guessing."

CHAPTER VI.

BLINDMAN'S BUFF.

WHILE Wray and the lieutenant were talking there was a scuffling movement in the crowd along the sidewalk, and a stocky, square-built man elbowed his way across the curb past one of the sentinel policemen and sauntered toward the armored car. He was a swaggering, ruddy-faced individual, with a pugnacious jowl and deep-set, gimletlike eyes. The lieutenant caught sight of the newcomer and nodded with an expression of relief.

"Here you are, Tom!" he called. "You're just the chap we want. This is Detective Chivington, one of our plain-clothes men," he remarked to Wray. "I take it that you're making a formal complaint in this case?"

"We are, indeed," was the answer.

"I'm turning it over to Chivington, then. This sort of thing is just in his line." The lieutenant repressed a sound that might have been mistaken for a chuckle. "I wish you luck, Tom."

"What's it all about?" the detective inquired.

Dean explained in a few words, and Chivington's hard mouth twisted in an ironic grin. "Am I supposed to swallow that yarn?" he asked.

"You're supposed to get busy on this case," replied the lieutenant severely. "You know now how things stand. Dig in! We want the thief, and most of all we want to recover the jeweled dress. Get 'em!"

"Yes, sir," returned the detective, his manner a trifle less flippant. "I'll get after 'em."

"I forgot to mention Dapper Dan McGee," Wray put in. "Know him?"

"Who—Danny?" echoed Chivington, while the lieutenant looked up swiftly. "Do I know my own uncle? Sure, I do!"

"This McGee was hanging around the theater to-night, trying to present Mademoiselle Magya with a bunch of violets. He tried three times, and, finally, just as she was getting back into the car, he reached her, and she accepted the flowers."

"Wouldn't you know it!" exclaimed Chivington in a tone tinged with admiration. "You'll always find Danny where the pickin's look biggest."

"Did he have a chance to touch the dress?" asked the lieutenant.

"No," answered Wray. "Mademoiselle merely brushed past him. He couldn't have stolen her costume, or so much as nipped one diamond. I speak

of him merely because he has a reputation as a crook, and because he was much in evidence to-night. I really don't see how he could have anything to do with the theft. Still"—Wray shrugged his shoulders—"I don't see how any one else could have, either."

"We'll have Danny in and ask him what about it," promised Dean, and arched his brows at Chivington. "What do you want to start doing now?" he asked.

"I got about two million questions I better ask these people," replied the detective, "just to make sure where I stand. We can all go somewhere and have a good chin together."

Julius Marat had been hovering near enough to hear a part of the conversation. The detective's proposal brought a scowl to his face. "My wife she's tired out an' very much upset," he protested. "She should go home now."

"Where do you live?" asked Chivington.

Marat mentioned the name of an apartment hotel, not far from Forty-second Street.

"Right!" said the plain-clothes man serenely. "We'll go with you."

No one could possibly offer any legitimate objection to that plan, so, after a brief consultation, a policeman was sent to call a taxicab. The armored automobile and the six guardsmen were of no further use to anybody, and the lieutenant told the agency men to take their car and clear out before the rapidly growing crowd became unmanageable.

Meanwhile a taxicab had come up to the curb with a patrolman riding on the running board. Mademoiselle was helped from the steel car into the other vehicle, and the transfer was made so quickly that the waiting throng scarcely caught a glimpse of her bedraggled white furs. The others piled into the cab after her—Marat, Neila Lester, Wray, and Detective Chivington—and

a second later they were whirling away from the scene of trouble.

The Marats occupied a roomy suite in a so-called club-apartment building that catered to a money-squandering class of transients who flit briefly among the lights of Broadway. On reaching their destination, mademoiselle and her companions entered an ornate lobby and passed up to a higher floor by elevator.

The door of the dancer's suite was opened to the newcomers by a small, blond man, dank and fishy of eye, and stolid of demeanor. Marat spoke to him in a foreign tongue, calling him "Paul," but did not introduce him. The man's deferential manner indicated that he might be a servant—probably a sort of valet-butler-courier engaged in the service of these theatrical wanderers.

Mademoiselle Marat asked to be excused while she made herself presentable, and her companions waited in the reception room. Wray and Neila Lester found themselves chairs, Marat began pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back, while Detective Chivington deposited his weight on the edge of a fragile-looking table, and whistled to himself, staring around at the garish furnishings of the place with every sign of approval.

In a short while an inner door opened, and Magya's voice called to her guests. "Come now, if you please," she invited.

The four passed through the doorway to enter a large, brightly lighted dressing room. Mademoiselle had removed her stage make-up, and she looked wan and hollow-eyed under the searching electroliers. She had put on a brocaded dressing gown and was reclining on a chaise longue among a litter of silk cushions.

Behind the dancer stood a second woman, who gazed at the intruders from under sharply drawn brows. She was a swarthy-complexioned, raven-haired woman, with full, red lips and dark, brooding eyes. In

figure she might have been described as being lank, rather than merely thin or slender. Apparently she was several years older than Magya.

"This is Madame Rennault," said the dancer, with a slight wave of her hand. "She come with me from abroad."

The room was in disorder, littered with all sorts of wearing finery, hats and lingerie and crumpled gowns and discarded slippers. It was evident that mademoiselle had dressed here and put on her make-up for the stage, and it was equally apparent that nobody had taken the trouble to tidy the room after her. Madame Rennault now began removing garments from some of the chairs to make places for the visitors to sit.

"Madame Rennault is my dresser and looks after my wardrobes," said the dancer, as though to explain the other's presence. "But she is also my good friend."

Wray and Neila Lester sat down together on a sofa, and Detective Chivington, who seemed to have an aversion for chairs, planted his leaning bulk against the corner of Magya's make-up table. Marat continued his restless prowling, back and forth across the floor.

The detective wanted to know the entire story of the stolen dress, with all minutiae of detail, from the time the gown left the McAllister & McAbe vault until the moment that mysterious hands tore it violently from the dancer's person. He shot his rapid-fire interrogations, first at one witness and then another, until his listeners almost began to fear that he had not exaggerated much in his statement that he had two million or so questions to ask.

Wray had already told Lieutenant Dean all he knew about the affair, and he could not help being bored by the lengthy rehashing of the evening's events. Inasmuch as nobody seemed to have the remotest inkling as to what had happened in the darkened automobile

when the precious costume disappeared, he could not see where anything was to be gained by such elaborate cross-examination.

Chivington directed the majority of his questions toward Magya, and the dancer answered freely and willingly, but her wearied expression said plainly that she was not having a good time; that she was keeping herself in hand only by an effort, waiting miserably until she could get rid of her visitors and go to bed. She had kicked off her gold-cloth dancing pumps, and now sat, half reclining, with her feet tucked under her, gazing with overstrained attentiveness at the importunate detective.

Mademoiselle's cast-off pumps had dropped onto the floor beside another pair of slippers of like design and material. Wray, who was giving little heed to the endless conversation, sat aloof, in musing silence, his eyes absently tracing the arched curves of the dancer's dainty slippers as they lay on the rug before him. He was thinking how easy it would be to kick a toe through the flimsy fabric, and it struck him that the dancer, like an automobile owner, was sensible to keep spare shoes on hand, in case of punctures or blow-outs, when he was recalled from his inane reflections by Chivington's suddenly turning in his direction.

"Did anybody crowd past you in the armored car?" demanded the officer.

The publicity man shook his head. "Marat and I were seated opposite each other in the forward part of the car, blocking the aisle. I don't see how anybody could have pushed between us. When the light went out we both jumped to our feet and were practically in each other's arms during the few seconds that mademoiselle was struggling and screaming."

"Hum!" The detective cogitated, and then, after a little pause, he crossed over to Magya and examined the dark marks on her throat.

Like Lieutenant Dean, Chivington was of the opinion that the bruised spots could be nothing else except the ugly mementos of a powerfully clutching hand. He was expressing a positive opinion on the subject when a sharp exclamation from Wray interrupted his speech.

"Huh?" he ejaculated, turning blankly to stare.

Wray was looking again at the dancer's golden shoes, an expression of lively curiosity in his deep-gray eyes. The detective followed the direction of the other's glance and abruptly stepped forward to pick up one of the discarded pumps. He held it under the light, to reveal a splotch of moist black mud over the instep.

"That what you're cracking about?" the detective demanded. "Meaning you think somebody trampled her?" He glanced from Wray's feet to Marat's, but the shoes of both were guiltless of any speck of mud.

"Oh, we didn't do it," the publicity man said lightly. "None of our party could have stepped into any mud. We none of us left the clean sidewalks, either going to or coming from the stage."

"You're trying to tell me that some stranger got into that armored car with you—somebody who oozed in at a crack, maybe, and wafted out the same way, dragging the lady's dress with 'im?" Chivington laughed raucously. "Try me on another one!"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," returned Wray mildly, "save that the dress is gone."

The detective shrugged and faced Magya again. "What about you, miss? Remember anybody steppin' on you?"

"It all happen so quick!" answered mademoiselle. "And I was so beside myself with fright when I feel that—that—choking at my throat—tearing at the dress I wear." She shuddered at the recollection. "Oh, I don't remem-

ber if my feet are stepped on by somebody, or not." It was just like a terrific nightmare—so much happening all at the same time."

"You don't know how the mud got on your slipper, then?"

"No." Magya shook her dark head. "No. I am sorry not to remember, but I do not."

Chivington regarded the mud spot dubiously for a moment, turned the slipper over in his hand, and finally dropped it back onto the floor. "I guess it don't mean anything special one way or another," he remarked. He proceeded to ask a few more questions, but at last, with a grimace of disgust, he stopped the catechism.

"I don't see how all you people who were on the spot can know as little as you seem to know," he complained. "You don't give me anything to work on."

He picked up his hat and crammed it down on the back of his head. "Well, I'll dig into it anyhow, like I said I would. If there was a diamond dress, and it really was copped by somebody, like you claim, why, maybe we'll find it some place—in some hock shop or something. You folks just sit tight, and if there's anything to report, you'll hear from us."

The detective turned on his heel without further speech and stalked out of the apartment.

The abrupt departure of the man left the other occupants of the room staring in blank surprise. For the moment no one was observing Wray's movements, and he stooped casually and picked up two of mademoiselle's dancing pumps. He thrust one slipper into each of his coat pockets and then got up from his seat. Neila Lester caught his eye, and she likewise arose from the couch.

"We might as well be going, too," Wray remarked. "I'll see you tomorrow. Mademoiselle will be expected to do her dance as programmed—if not

in jewels, then in one of her own costumes."

"If Magya is feeling well to-morrow, you will see her," returned Marat severely; "otherwise not."

"I trust she will be all right," said Wray. He and Neila Lester said good night and together left the dancer's rooms.

"I saw you pick them up," said the girl under her breath as soon as the door was shut behind them. "And they aren't mates."

"I didn't think anybody was looking." He grinned and brought the slippers out of his pocket. "They're both 'lefts,'" he said, comparing them. "Well, it doesn't matter. I'll send them back when I get around to it."

"You think that speck of mud has any bearing on the theft?" Neila asked.

"Chivington didn't seem to think so," Wray replied.

The girl looked up with worried eyes. "What do you think?" she inquired.

"I think we can't afford to overlook the tiniest clew." Wray pocketed the slippers again, and shook his head. "You've seen by the attitude of the police how much they intend to do. They don't more than half believe our story, and I can't say that I blame them. About all they'll do will be to watch the pawnshops and fences, and you can well believe that the thief is too clever to try to dispose of a million-dollar dress by any ordinary method."

"And we haven't the faintest idea how the theft was committed, or who the thief can be," said the girl with a troubled frown. "It seems hopeless, doesn't it? And I—I feel more or less responsible."

"In a sense we're both responsible," Wray asserted. "And we can't count on the police for help." He nodded grimly, and his firm lips suddenly tightened. "If we get that dress back, you and I are the ones who'll have to find it."

CHAPTER VII.

SLENDER CLEWS.

PASSING around the hallway corner, Wray and Neila Lester caught sight of Chivington, who stood by the elevator shaft, his thumb pressing impatiently on the bell button.

"Hello!" called the detective as the newcomers approached him. "Where're you two going now?"

"I've got to go back to the theater for a few minutes," answered Wray.

The elevator came up before anything further could be said, and the three descended to the street. It appeared that they were all going in the same direction, and they walked along together through the still-crowded thoroughfare.

"Our main difficulty is the fact that it will be impossible to identify the majority of the stones," said Neila Lester, as though continuing a conversation. "There are thousands of small, commonplace gems, worth a fortune in the bulk. The thieves might hold back the bigger, finer stones, and dispose of the others a handful at a time, and even if they were found we couldn't prove ownership."

"I'd thought of that," said Wray. "If we don't recover the dress before the fringes have been stripped, we're out of luck."

"I'm going to work as fast as I can," put in Chivington cheerfully. "But I'm not promising anything, mind you. We're up against a tough proposition."

They had turned into Sixth Avenue and were sauntering down the street under the elevated structure. As they neared the Forty-second Street corner, Chivington halted to peer intently about him. "It was along through here that you claim you were robbed," he remarked.

Wray made no reply, but glanced up the street in the direction of Fifth Avenue. The armored car was no longer parked at the curb, and the

crowd of curiosity mongers had dispersed.

"You say you were driving under the 'L' here when your light went out and Millie What's-'Er-Name yelled she was losing her dress?" inquired Chivington.

"Right here," answered the publicity man.

As he spoke, a train rumbled into the station overhead and pulled up with loudly grinding brakes.

"Wait a minute!" said the detective, looking upward. "I want to see about something." Without further explanation he turned and galloped up the elevated stairway to the platform above. After an absence of two or three minutes he came clattering back down to the sidewalk.

"It pays to think about little things," he observed as he rejoined his two companions. "I figured maybe the ticket chopper up there might have been looking down when your car went under him, and if he had been he might have noticed something."

"Well?" inquired Wray.

"I just now asked him," replied the detective, "and he said he didn't notice anything. Not that it would mean a lot," Chivington went on reflectively. "If Danny McGee was on this job, nobody'd be likely to notice anything. He moves like a shadow, and the eye's got to be quicker than the hand to catch him at work."

"You're suggesting that this Mr. McGee holds a mysterious power of some sort?" inquired Neila Lester. "An uncanny power that enables him to swing down, as it were, from an 'L' structure and disrobe his victim and carry off her dress?" She smiled at the absurdity of the notion. "Dear me, it would be dreadful, wouldn't it? Nobody'd ever dare go on the streets again, unless they wore padlocks for buttons."

"Even padlocks can be picked," remarked Wray.

"You said it!" rejoined Chivington serenely. "'Locks' is just a five-letter word to Danny, meaning 'easy pickings.' The only place you can keep him out of is jail.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," added the detective. "If you're going down to the theater, I'll just go along with you. Danny's butter-and-egg route is down along that direction, and we might happen to meet him. And if we meet him I'll hand him a pinch, and we'll ask him where's the diamond-studded dress. And if he says he doesn't know, why, we'll give him a sweat, and maybe he'll say, 'Oh, yes, Tom; now that you remind me I do remember where the diamond-studded dress is!'"

Having hit on his scheme of action, Chivington turned his face toward the theatrical district with his two companions. It was not many blocks to the Curtain Theater, and instead of bothering to look for a taxicab they walked the remaining distance, threading their way through the crowds, while Chivington's restless eyes took the measure of all passers-by.

When they reached the theater they found the lobby dark and the front doors closed and locked. Wray knew, however, that some of the stage crew would still be on duty, and he led the way around the side street to the alley entrance.

Detective Chivington so far had seen nobody who in any manner resembled the "wizard," McGee, and was beginning to feel that he had wasted time in coming to the theater. "What are you here for?" he asked the publicity man in sudden curiosity.

"I had a couple of business matters to attend to," was the answer. "I wanted to get a photograph from our files, for one thing. Also it's just occurred to me that I must telephone Samuel McAbe and break the news to him about his lost jewels."

"While we're phoning," said the de-

tective, "I might as well give my station a ring. They may have picked up Danny."

Wray and his companions were turning into the alleyway, when a pair of automobile headlights flashed around the corner, and a car rumbled up behind them. They stopped instinctively to glance over their shoulders and saw that the vehicle was a taxicab. The driver drew up at the curb, the door was opened, and a muffled figure emerged from the cab.

The newcomer was a woman, and as she moved hesitatingly across the sidewalk Wray had an impression that he knew her. He peered searchingly into her face, and recalled where they had met. She was Mademoiselle Marat's traveling companion, Madame Rennault. He spoke to her, calling her by name.

It was the woman's turn to stare. "Who are you?" she asked.

"We met you a little while ago in mademoiselle's apartments," he said. "I'm Wray. The others are Miss Lester and Detective Chivington."

"Oh!" said the woman. "It was too dark to see who you were at first, and I was a little frightened. Mademoiselle Magya has sent me here to search for her purse, which is lost."

"Her purse?" echoed Chivington.

"It was in the pocket of her ermine cloak. When I go to hang it up in the closet, I find the purse is not in the pocket. There was money and some of Magya's rings in the purse, and she think perhaps she dropped it on the stage while waiting to dance."

"Marat held the coat while mademoiselle was on, and he may have lost the purse from the pocket then," Wray suggested. "Or it may have fallen somewhere in the alley as we entered or left the theater. We'll look."

They turned down the passage leading from the street to the stage door. Chivington lighted his pocket lamp and inspected the way ahead, turning the

flash into every dark nook and corner; but no purse was found. At length they reached the doorway and passed into the dingy precincts at the rear of the theater.

Some of the stage lights were still burning, and a number of scene shifters were moving about, reëving rope coils and stacking dismantled box sets against the brick walls. Inquiries among the men failed to discover anything of the lost purse. While Madame Rennault was searching in the gloom near the olio entrance, Wray beckoned to Neila Lester, climbed over the footlight trough, and descended the runway leading into the orchestra pit. He walked a short distance up the center aisle of the darkened auditorium and faced the stage.

"It was about here where McGee stood when he tried to persuade an usher to give Magya his violets," he remarked to Neila.

"Yes," agreed the girl, and looked at him questioningly, unable to guess what he was driving at.

Wray lifted his voice suddenly, calling to Madame Rennault. "Would you mind going upstage and standing there near the left entrance?" he asked.

The woman came out before the footlights and stared in wonderment. "What?" she asked.

Wray explained about the man with the bouquet. "I merely want somebody to occupy Mademoiselle Marat's approximate position on the stage at the time the man was standing here with the usher. You'll do as well as any one else. Do you mind?"

By the blank expression on her face, Madame Rennault made it clear that she could not imagine what such a singular procedure meant; but at the same time she evidently could think of no reason for being disobliging. With a faint shrug she crossed the stage and took her position at the spot indicated.

"Thank you," said Wray, and pucker-

ing his lips he whistled a couple of bars of mademoiselle's dance melody.

Chivington came forward to look on with a puzzled scowl. "Are you cuckoo, or is it me?" he asked. "What's it all about? Danny's a smooth worker; but, honest now, you didn't think he could stand where you are in the audience and lift a flock of diamonds off a lady here on the stage?"

Wray smiled lightly. "No; I guess he couldn't."

"Mademoiselle Marat was wearing the dress when she finished her dance," put in Neila Lester. "We left the theater immediately afterward. We went straight from the stage door to the armored car and did not stop or loiter for a second. You and I and several of the guards walked a pace or so in front of mademoiselle, and the other guards followed right at her heels. Nobody could possibly have taken off her dress, either on the stage, or while she was on her way to the car."

"Of course not!" agreed Wray. "I never for a moment meant to suggest such a thing."

"Just what were you trying to make out?" demanded the detective.

"I was just wondering if I could see things from McGee's point of view," returned the publicity man evasively. He laughed and shook his head and did not offer further explanations. "Did you find the purse?" he asked Madame Rennault.

The woman came to the footlights and shook her head. "It was not in the entrance," she said.

"If it were picked up, it may have been turned over to the house treasurer," he said. "In which case it would be in the safe upstairs. We might go and look."

He waited for the others to join him and then conducted them through the unlighted house to the lobby stairway that led into the offices on the floor above. One of his keys admitted him

to the suite of rooms used by the executive staff of the theater. After turning on the lights, he crossed to a big safe standing in the corner of one of the rooms. He twisted the combination dial two or three times, swung open the door, and stooped to investigate the contents of the safe. Presently he turned, shaking his head.

"Sorry!" he said to Madame Renault. "There's no purse here."

"I want to call up my precinct," put in Chivington.

Wray nodded toward a telephone standing on a near-by desk and then excused himself and went into a room adjoining, where photographs were kept on file by the press department. He rummaged through the drawers of a big, steel cabinet and presently drew forth an unmounted, time-stained photographic print.

For a moment he examined the picture curiously under the ceiling light, and then, with a repressed chuckle, he buttoned it carefully in the breast pocket of his coat and went back to the next room to rejoin his companions.

Chivington was seated with his feet on the desk, a telephone precariously balanced on one knee. He was just finishing a conversation with some one at the other end of the wire. "That's hot!" the detective exclaimed. "Be right over! G'by!"

He clicked the receiver back onto the hook, thumped down the telephone, and dropped his feet to the floor. "What do you know?" he asked, turning to Wray. "One of the flatties has just picked up Danny McGee. They've got him at the station now, and they've got him right. First time we ever caught him with the goods. What do you suppose they found on him?"

Wray's keen eyes flickered with interest. "What?" he asked.

"When they searched him they found Millie What's-'Er-Name's purse."

"What else?" asked Neila Lester with

a sharp-drawn breath. "What about the dress?"

"Nothing else! Danny didn't have any jeweled dress on him, if that's what you mean." Chivington shook his head. "There was only the purse."

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME NEW RELATIONS.

PUSHING his chair back, the detective stood up and jerked his thumb toward Madame Renault. "I'm going to hop over to the station," he said. "I guess you'd better come along with me and identify your friend's property."

"How do you suppose McGee got the purse?" asked Wray.

"That one's easy," returned Chivington. "The lady was getting into the car, and Danny comes along and hands her a bunch of violets, like you told me. That bird could extract your wisdom teeth if he got that close to you. While you were looking at him he just goes ahead and shifts the lady's poke from her pocket into his. There wouldn't be any more to it than that."

"I was standing right beside them at the moment," said Neila Lester incredulously. "I had no idea he was picking mademoiselle's pocket."

"You wouldn't!" Chivington assured her.

"He certainly couldn't have taken anything besides the purse," the girl declared. "Not at that time. He no more than brushed past Mademoiselle Marat with his hand. I was watching him. He couldn't even have started to unfasten the dress. Not then!"

"Of course not!" said Wray. "The dancer was wearing the dress when we all got into the armored car and drove away. We can be positive as to that."

"I know," answered the girl. "The theft took place while we were crossing Sixth Avenue under the 'L' platform. And that seems impossible, too. It's the weirdest thing I ever heard of. The

more you try to puzzle it out, the more bewildering it becomes." She sighed and shook her head. "It just doesn't seem as though it could really have happened."

"Are you sure that it did happen?" demanded the detective with a sidelong glance.

"It happened!" declared Wray. "Don't make any mistake about that."

Chivington eyed the other shrewdly for a moment and nodded curtly. "All right!" he agreed. "The dress was stolen, just like you say. We don't know how it went, or who's got it; but if it was Danny McGee's job, he's a slicker sleight-of-hand artist than even I would have believed. I'll tell him so."

"You'll do all you can to learn the truth," pleaded Neila Lester.

"Sure! I'm going over to see Danny now, and if this was his lay I'll pump it out of him. Never fear!" He beckoned to Madame Rennault, and the two said good night and took their departure.

As soon as the others had left the room, Wray picked up the telephone and gave the operator the number of McAllister & McAbe's jewelry store. He waited for two or three minutes, but received no response. After thumbing through the directory he tried to reach McAbe's residence, but the second call likewise remained unanswered.

"Well," he observed presently, hanging up the receiver, "there's nothing further to do here. We might as well go back."

Extinguishing the lights, he locked the office door, and he and Neila descended the stairs and passed out of the theater building. They were just stepping forth to the sidewalk in front of the house, when they saw a short, dumpy shape hurrying down the street toward them. A man came up under the porte-cochère, looked sharply at Wray, and breathlessly spoke his name.

"Oh, it's Mr. McAbe!" said the girl, peering into the man's face.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," panted the newcomer. "Waited at the store and, when you didn't come, I drove back here, watching for the armored car. But I didn't see it. What's happened?"

"We've been robbed," answered Wray; "the dress is gone."

In as few words as possible he recounted the circumstances of the affair.

Samuel McAbe was little in stature, but he proved that night that he was big in the qualities of pluck and fortitude, in his ability to absorb bad news. He heard the story through without lamentation, without a word of reproach.

"It's tough luck," he said slowly, "but so far as I can make out, nobody is to blame. My business is full of hazards, and you've got to take the bad with the good."

"It isn't as though we hadn't been careful," said Neila Lester dolefully. "We took every imaginable precaution. But—well, it just wasn't humanly possible to guard against the sort of thief that seems to be able to reach invisible hands through a wall of steel."

"It is a kind of mysterious business, isn't it?" mused McAbe. He reached forth his plump hand and gently patted the girl's arm. "But don't you worry. If six armed men and a banditproof car couldn't save the dress, you couldn't be expected to do it. It wasn't your fault."

"Was the dress insured?" asked Wray.

"Our insurance covers only goods that are left in the store," McAbe answered. "The minute we take stones outside, the risk is ours. We'll have to stand the loss." He sighed faintly, for the first time. "I really won't enjoy listening to what my partner McAllister will have to say to me in the morning. I'm the one who insisted on making up the dress."

"Perhaps we won't need to tell McAllister," suggested Wray.

"We'll have to tell him!"

"Not if we should recover the lost property and put it back in your vault—to-night."

"Eh?" McCabe regarded the other tensely. "You mean there's a chance?" He shook his head dubiously. "It seems to me that a robber with the phantom stealth to strip a dress from its wearer and escape, without even revealing his method—a being in possession of such superhuman endowments certainly is too clever to allow himself to be caught afterward."

Wray faced the stoic jewelry dealer with a growing sense of liking and respect. "Why, I don't think I'd ever sleep well again, Mr. McCabe, as long as I felt that you had suffered such a loss through me. We simply have to get that frock back."

"How would we go about finding it? You certainly can't have any idea where it is."

"No; not yet. But I have a sort of a hunch that I propose to follow. There may be nothing in it. I don't want to make any promises, and I don't want to arouse any false hopes. For that reason I'd rather not tell you what's in my mind. You'd probably think me crazy if I did."

"Nothing could be any crazier than what's already happened," remarked McCabe.

"I have an experiment I'd like to make," pursued Wray. "And I may want you and Miss Lester to help me."

"Without asking questions?"

"Well, yes. Then if nothing came of it, I'd be the only one to be disappointed."

"Are the police doing anything?" McCabe asked.

"In a half-hearted fashion, yes. I don't think they really believe we've lost the dress. I'm afraid we can't depend on them for any real assistance."

The jewelry merchant met Wray's quiet glance, and for a space he stood in silence, observing the younger man's

firm mouth and the determined set of his lean jaw. "In any case," McCabe remarked at length, "I believe I'd rather trail with you than with the police. What do you want me to do?"

"We've got to move cautiously from now on, and we probably will do things that will seem perfectly senseless to you. But I give you my assurance that there will be reason for every move we make."

"All right," agreed McCabe. "We're with you."

"To begin with," said Wray coolly, "you're my father, and Miss Lester is my sister—from this moment on."

"What?" McCabe's uncertain grin ended presently in a short laugh. "Very well," he assented, and turned to Neila Lester. "What do you say, Neila?"

The girl looked up at Wray and smiled. "I've always wanted a brother," she replied. "So I take this one here—with—on trial."

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOUSE OF SHADOWS.

IN a word or two the publicity man outlined his immediate plans. "We're visitors, just arrived in town," he explained gravely, "father and son and daughter. We'll rent a couple of rooms in a boarding house, and in all probability they won't be very elegant rooms. But if we're lucky we won't have to occupy them very long."

McCabe arched his brows slightly, but stifled any further sign of curiosity. "Where is this boarding house?" he asked.

"I don't know. We'll have to hunt until we find it, and our time is precious. We'd better be getting started."

McCabe's limousine was waiting for him at the neighboring corner, but Wray decided that they could really save time by walking. So the chauffeur was dismissed, and the three of them set out on foot.

It was only a short distance to Broadway, and when they turned into the lighted thoroughfare they found that the sidewalks were still thronged with pedestrians. Their first stop was made at a corner store which dealt in trunks and all sort of leather goods, and which still remained open for the benefit of belated customers. Here Wray purchased three pieces of luggage—a large suit case for himself, a medium-sized traveling case for the jewelry dealer, and a small hand satchel for Neila.

Each carrying a new, empty bag, the trio set forth again on their quest for lodgings.

Wray led the way around the corner into a squalid residential neighborhood, and from that point their wanderings seemed to be aimless and haphazard. This was a district of theatrical lodging houses. The dingy brick buildings, huddled together in long rows, were monotonously alike in outward appearance, but Wray looked searchingly into each doorway he passed, as though expecting to discover some distinguishing mark or guiding sign.

Whatever he was seeking, however, he traversed the entire block without finding it. He turned into the adjoining street, and had strolled halfway to the next corner before he halted.

"This might be it," he remarked to his wondering companions. "If you'll wait a second I'll find out."

The house before which he had stopped was a four-story structure with a high front stoop, guarded by a rusty iron railing. The occupants of the place could not be very tidy people. The steps and sidewalk looked as though they had not been swept for weeks. There were overturned ash cans and other household litter in the areaway, and on the curb stood a dwindling block of ice that had been left there to melt by whoever it was who was supposed to take it in. It was not a prepossessing-looking residence, but there was a

sign in one of the windows advertising rooms for rent, and Wray went up the stoop and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a collarless man who needed a shave.

"I'm looking for a couple of rooms with a fireplace in one of them," Wray told him.

The man opened the door wider, as though he wanted a better view of the visitor. "What would you do with a fireplace a hot night like this?" he asked.

"I always insist on a fireplace," was the answer.

"Well, there ain't no fireplaces in this house," the man admitted after a moment of thought. "But we could set you up a nice oil stove if you wanted."

"It won't do," replied Wray. "Sorry!" And he took his departure.

Rejoining his companions, he sauntered onward without stopping, as far as the next corner. Here he turned northward to the neighboring block, and continued his stroll in the other direction. A little way farther on, for no apparent reason, he again came to a standstill.

"Perhaps this place will suit us," he observed, gazing up at the building in front of him. This house, like the one of his previous visit, stood four stories high, presenting a shabby front to the street. Workmen had been tearing up the old flagging sidewalk and were preparing to lay concrete instead. Bags of cement were stacked along the curb, and barrels and mixing tools had been left in disorder after the day's work. A few dim lights showed in the cheaply curtained windows of the house, and a "Rooms to Let" sign was visible under one of the first-floor ledges.

After a momentary survey of his surroundings, Wray ran up the steps and pushed the bell button. The bell was answered by a middle-aged woman in a flowered-calico wrapper with her hair drawn back tight over her ears.

Wray repeated the inquiry about

lodgings, asking for at least two rooms for the accommodation of his father, his sister, and himself, and insisting that there must be an open fireplace.

The landlady regarded him with hawklike curiosity, as though she were a bit doubtful as to his sanity. "Some funny people come to this town," she ventured at last. "You're the second to-day."

"The second what?" asked the prospective lodger.

"The second person who wants a fireplace on a night like this, when I and most others are settin' in the open windows trying to keep ourselves cooled off."

"I want the fireplace on my father's account," Wray returned glibly, but without going into more definite explanations. "If you have a room with one in it?"

The woman shook her head. "I did have a fireplace, but it's gone now. I rented it to the people I was telling you about. A husband and his wife, just come to town for a visit, they said. I don't remember their name, but they wrote it for me on a card." She started to fumble about her dress. "I'll see if I can find the card. Maybe they come from the same part of the country as yourselves. Maybe you'll know 'em."

"Never mind the card," said Wray indifferently. "Names don't necessarily mean anything. I just want to know whether you can give me accommodations."

"Not with a fireplace," the woman replied. "Like I told you, this man and woman took my last fireplace room this afternoon. Fourth-floor front it was. They paid me a week's rent in advance and moved in with their trunk."

"Have you any vacant rooms to let without fireplaces?" the publicity man inquired.

"Two," was the answer; "fourth floor, just rear of the one I rented this afternoon."

"Very well," said Wray after brief reflection. "I suppose we'll have to accept what we can get. We'll take the two rooms."

"A week in advance," the landlady informed him. She named the rental price.

Wray promptly paid the money demanded, called to his companions, and the three entered the lodging house. The landlady escorted them up a steep flight of stairs to the top floor, and, halting in the middle of a dimly lighted hallway, she opened a door that admitted them into a dank and musty-smelling middle room. Finding a match somewhere, she struck a light and ignited a feebly burning gas jet.

"Here you are," she said and pointed to an inside doorway. "That goes into your other room. I hope you'll do all right here."

"We'll do nicely, I'm sure," returned Wray. "I'm certain that these are just the quarters we want—even without the fireplace."

The landlady took her departure, and the new tenants put down their luggage and turned to inspect their surroundings.

"You seem to be easy to please," remarked Neila Lester. With a single glance she took in the frayed, moth-eaten carpet on the floor, the two or three uncomfortable-looking chairs, the center table with the cracked marble top, the corner couch with its faded cretonne covering, the moldering wall paper, and the cracked mirror on the wall. She walked over to a window which looked out upon a wide alleyway and made a little grimace of distaste. "How long are we expected to stay in this place?"

Wray looked at her with faint amusement and shook his head. "I can't tell you definitely, I'm afraid, but let's hope it won't be for long."

"What are we supposed to do, now that we're here?" asked McAbe.

"Nothing whatever. Just sit quietly and wait."

"For what?" persisted the jewelry dealer.

"We can't be certain as to that; but it may be—some sort of news concerning the stolen dress." Wray glanced at his watch, hesitated for an instant, and then picked up his hat. "I've got to go out for a little while," he said, "but it won't be for long. Will you stay here until I get back?"

"It won't be pleasant," Neila told him, "but if it's necessary, we'll wait. Only please don't be gone long."

"I'll hurry," Wray promised and took his departure. He closed the door behind him, groped his way down the flights of dark stairs, and passed out through the front entrance of the house.

Wray went only as far as a drug store on the neighboring corner. He entered by a side door and shut himself up in a public telephone booth. For several minutes he remained in the stuffy inclosure, and when he came out he walked behind the drug counter and passed familiarly through the door leading into the cubby-hole where prescriptions were made up.

There was a man in the rear room, working with a mortar and pestle. He looked up at the sound of Wray's footsteps, and then nodded recognition and called his visitor by name. Wray moved closer and spoke in a confidential undertone. The two conversed in low voices for a moment, and then the druggist reached into an open drawer and pulled forth a small tissue-wrapped packet. This he slowly handed over and accepted a yellow-backed bill in payment.

With the little tissue parcel in his pocket, Wray left the drug store and hurried back to the lodging house. He had taken care to see to it that the front door was on the latch when he left, and he now readmitted himself without recourse to the bell. Running lightly up

the stairs, he returned to the rooms he had rented.

Neila Lester and McAbe were waiting for him. The jewelry dealer had found a pack of dog-eared cards in one of the bureau drawers and was trying to while away a tedious hour by teaching his pretty employee some sort of intricate, two-handed card game. The girl did not seem to be much interested, and she raised anxious eyes and pushed back her chair as Wray opened the door.

Wray shook his head in answer to the look of interrogation. "Not yet," he said. "But something ought to be happening soon. I've an idea we'll hear from Danny McGee before very long."

"McGee?" echoed Neila with a startled expression. "Why, he was arrested for stealing Mademoiselle Marat's purse. He's in jail, isn't he?"

Wray shook his head. "McGee's out. He's on his way here now—to this house—to this room."

CHAPTER X.

BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR.

THERE was a moment of tense silence, while McAbe and Neila Lester stared blankly at the publicity man.

"You mean he's escaped from the police?" exclaimed the girl at last. "And if he has, what makes you think he's coming here?"

"I invited him," was the reply.

"You what?"

"I telephoned Lieutenant Dean to send McGee to this room." Wray laughed. "The lieutenant needed a bit of persuading, but he finally consented to release the prisoner temporarily and permit him to come here under escort. Detective Chivington's bringing him."

"But what do you want with McGee?" asked the puzzled jewelry dealer. "You think he knows where to find the dress?"

"I think we may need him before the evening's over—in his professional char-

acter," was the evasive answer. Wray turned with a thoughtful frowning of his brows to glance across the room. "Meanwhile," he pursued in an absent-minded voice, "please don't let me disturb the card game. I want to look around here for a moment."

He crossed the room and opened the nearest window, to peer outside into the darkness. Before him was a grille fire escape, protected by an iron railing, which ran along the whole side of the building. He climbed out upon the platform. A few feet farther along the side wall, within arm's reach, he made out a window opening, which, presumably, gave ingress to the room adjoining his, at the front of the house.

The neighboring window had been raised slightly for ventilation, and no light showed through the aperture. Wray climbed over the fire-escape railing, and, climbing tightly with one hand, he leaned forward above the dark area-way and softly pushed up the sash. For two or three seconds he waited, listening. Hearing no sound, he drew back to a safer roosting place on the fire escape.

From his pocket he brought forth the tissue-wrapped package he had obtained from the druggist. Removing the paper, he uncovered a small wooden box. He took off the lid and struck a match. The box contained a brownish, powderlike substance. He deliberately applied the flame to the edge of the wood, and presently both the box and its contents began to smolder with a faint sputtering, giving off fumes.

Wray produced a short length of wire from his pocket. One end he twisted around the burning box, and, swinging it at arm's length, he clambered again over the fire-escape rail and reached his neighbor's open window. He dropped the box over the sill and then shut the window sash down over the free end of the wire, leaving it suspended inside the room beyond.

With cool-headed agility, he scrambled back onto the fire escape and jumped down lightly to the floor of his own room.

McAbe and Neila were standing by the window, where they had been watching him in open-mouthed wonderment. He grinned at them cheerfully as he dusted his hands.

"That looked like a good card game you were showing Miss Lester," he remarked casually. "What was it? Piquet? I wouldn't mind learning it myself."

"What in the world were you doing out on that——" McAbe started to ask and then checked himself to gaze toward the closed door. A light footstep had sounded outside, and almost at the same instant some one rapped cautiously on the panel.

Without speaking, Wray crossed the room and opened the door. Two men were standing at the entrance. One was Detective Chivington. The second was a sleek-looking, pasty-faced young man, whom the officer introduced with a brusque jerk of his thumb. "This is Danny McGee," he said. "What do you want with us?"

Instead of inviting his visitors into the room, Wray quietly stepped outside. "I sent for you——" he began in an undertone and then stopped. He lifted his head and sniffed. "What's that queer smell?" he asked.

"Huh?" Chivington likewise threw up his head to test the scent of the atmosphere. Suddenly his jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wide. "Oho!" he ejaculated. "You don't say so!"

"What?" asked Wray.

"How'd you find this dump?" demanded the officer. "You picked a swell place. Whew! Whiff that!"

McAbe and Neila had come to the door, and they also had begun to draw tentative breaths, sniffing the queer, sickish odor that drifted through the dark hallway.

"What is it?" asked Wray.

"Hop!" returned Chivington succinctly. "We've made a lucky stumble. What do you know about that, Danny? It's an opium hangout!"

Wray had moved forward a few steps to prospect along the hallway and had stopped before the door leading into the front chamber. Suddenly he beckoned to the officer. "It's coming through the keyhole here," he said. "In this room."

Chivington advanced in a stride, brisk and businesslike. He was not a member of the drug squad, but nevertheless the scent of opium is a clarion call to any policeman. The discovery of an unsuspected rendezvous of drug users would mean a fresh merit mark in his precinct record. "The other business can wait—whatever it is," he said; "but first off, let's crash this joint."

He tried the door handle, but found it locked. Without a second's hesitation he stepped backward, preparing to hurl his weight against the door. Wray, however, checked him with outstretched hand.

"Just a moment!" protested the publicity man. "Why make a disturbance? You've forgotten McGee, haven't you?"

Chivington paused, and a slow grin of comprehension overspread his face. "Sure!" he agreed, and turned to his prisoner. "Danny," he said, "the lieutenant gave you back your keys and things. We want to explore this place without a racket. Go ahead and do your stuff!"

Wray moved out of the way and spoke under his breath to Neila. "Now you know why we sent for Mr. McGee. We needed the help of an expert lock picker."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE FLICKERING GASLIGHT.

IT was evident that Danny McGee took a certain grim pride in his professional skill, and by his genial smile of consent he proved that he was not in

the least unwilling to display his talents in the presence of an audience. He examined the door lock with a contemptuous shrug, then fished around in his pocket, and pulled out a bunch of thin-shanked keys. One of the keys was slipped into the keyhole, his long, sensitive fingers moved with a deft twist, and the lock shot back in its wards. McGee turned the handle, and the door opened.

All was dark and still within, and the fumes of opium filled the oppressive atmosphere. Wray and Chivington crossed the threshold together, the detective pressing the button of his flash lamp. The beam of light searched its way around the chamber and, so far as the intruders could see at a first sweeping glance, the place was unoccupied.

The furnishings were similar in character to those next door. There were several decrepit-looking chairs, a dirty, threadbare rug, a bureau with blistered, flaking varnish, and a tottering iron bed covered with a soiled counterpane. The bed apparently had not been slept in.

The room differed from the adjoining chamber only in its larger size, and in the fact that it boasted an open fireplace—a shallow-grated affair with sooted tiles and a dingy marble mantelpiece.

Whoever the tenants might be, they had left no clothing or personal effects about. The only visible evidence of occupancy was a stout wardrobe trunk, shut and locked, that stood in front of the window.

Chivington had noticed a gas jet reaching from a bracket on the near-by wall. While he was fumbling for a match, Wray crossed the room to grope behind the trunk. He found the charred box he had hung in the room from the other side of the sill. The small flame by now had burned itself out. Casually he lifted the sash, released the wire and quickly tossed the box out of the window.

As he turned, a match flared in

Chivington's hand, and the feeble gas-light was ignited. Nobody apparently had observed Wray's action.

The detective strode across the room, peering about him with lowering brows. He looked under the bed, poked behind the bureau, and investigated the interior of an empty closet. "Funny!" he remarked in disappointment. "Somebody was hitting the dizzy smoke in this place. But they've gone. The hops have hopped. The heads have headed out."

Moving across the room, he hoisted the window to the top and gazed at the city's glowing sky line. "I guess they must have trickled out of the place a few minutes before we got here," he mused. "Well, it's a clean get-away. But maybe they left their props behind. Let's look."

He stopped in front of the bureau, wrenched at the drawers, and managed to worry them open one after another. But they were all empty. He probed the bed, searching under the mattress and pillows, and ended up by turning back the four corners of the rug. Finding nothing, he strode to the window and stood for a moment suspiciously eying the trunk.

"I suppose I got a right to kick this in," he reflected, "and then again—maybe not so." He hesitated for a moment, and then cocked a speculative glance toward McGee, who was waiting quietly in the doorway. "How are you on trunks, Danny?" he asked quite suddenly.

McGee sauntered forward without a word. The trunk in question was built on massive lines, sheathed and bound in metal, and safeguarded from prying hands by the heaviest sort of solid-brass locks. It looked as strong as a steel safe. But McGee seemed quite undaunted. He inspected the lock and negligently drew forth his bunch of keys. Selecting a thin, flat key, he tried it in the slot. It went into the channels

of the slot without difficulty, but it would not turn.

Removing the key, McGee rubbed it in his oily hair and once more inserted it in the lock. Again he drew it out and strolled over under the gas jet to examine the flat strip of metal. From somewhere about his person he conjured forth a tiny file blade. Here and there he filed at the thin edge of steel, while little bright specks of metal dropped at his feet.

Presently he was satisfied with his work. He returned to the trunk and slid the key into the lock. His fingers turned with the slightest pressure; there was an audible click, and that was all. He tapped the lock with his fist, and the hasp flew open.

Silently McGee stepped aside. Chivington spread his arms across the top of the trunk, put his shoulder into the effort, and opened the two sections. On one side were a tier of drawers; the other side held the usual wardrobe compartment with a pull-out track and garment hangers. A folded sheet hid the contents from view.

The detective jerked aside the sheet. Then he stumbled backward quickly as if something had struck him.

McAbe and Neila had edged forward to look, and when they saw inside the trunk they just stood still and stared. The little jewelry dealer's eyes were fairly bursting from his head. One of the girl's hands had caught at her side, as though she felt a sudden want of breath.

From one of the garment hangers was suspended a dancing frock—a gown decked with jewels, fringed in a thousand scintillating stones, diamonds and pearls and rubies, and three cool-green emeralds gleaming in the flickering gas-light.

Neila Lester's lips parted as she looked, and she spoke in a hushed voice: "The dress—the stolen dress!" Emotion almost overcame her.

CHAPTER XII.

EXPECTED VISITORS.

FOR a space of twenty seconds nobody moved or seemed to breathe. They were all grouped in a tense circle before the open trunk, staring in dumb wonderment at the shimmering gown. It was Samuel McAbe who first broke the spell of silence. He shook his head, as if arousing himself from a dream. With a strangely hesitant gesture he reached forward his hand to touch the sparkling strands of jewels.

"Neila!" he cried with a sighing gasp. "Are these real? Are they ours? Tell me! Make certain!"

The girl advanced, dabbled her fingers in the gems, and nodded her head. "They're yours, all right," she answered—"the stones. It's the dress we made for Magya. There's no doubt about that."

"But where—how did it get here in this trunk? Wray! How did we ever find it?"

Detective Chivington had turned to face the publicity man, and there was a look of dawning suspicion in his glance. "Say!" he blurted out. "Let us in on this deal, will you? You knew all the time what was in that trunk!"

Wray was standing a little apart from the others, his hands thrust nonchalantly into his coat pockets. His feelings of satisfaction, of elation, were betrayed only by the faintest glint in his gray, smiling eyes. "I didn't know," he answered.

"But you brought us to this house—to the room next to this one," protested McAbe. "How did you find——"

"A guess," put in Wray; "just a blind shot!"

"But this—finding a needle in a haystack! It was something more than guesswork that brought us here."

"I had a pretty well-defined notion that this might be the place to look," Wray admitted, "but I wasn't sure

enough to force my way in. We had to be very careful——"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Neila, her eyes kindling with growing enlightenment. "The smell of opium is here! You were leaning across from the fire escape of the next room, doing something at this window. What was it you did?"

Wray smiled and shot a sidewise glance toward Chivington. The detective was watching him narrowly, with brows notched in sharp inquiry.

"Let's get this straight," said the officer. "You got me here on a faked excuse and touched off that smoke on purpose?"

"Sorry!" returned Wray in a conciliatory tone. "But it was the simplest way I could think of on the spur of the moment. We had to get into this room somehow. I didn't know who might be in here. I didn't dare break the door or enter by burglarious methods. I might easily have been mistaken in fancying the dress might be hidden here—in which case I'd have put my foot into a dreadful mess. Breaking and entering at night! Penitentiary offense. You understand?"

"Yeh," said Chivington with ominous quiet. "Well?"

"My suspicions weren't strongly enough grounded to apply for a search warrant," Wray pursued. "There wasn't time for that, anyhow. We had to act fast, before the thief was given a chance to pull the dress to pieces and dispose of the stones separately."

"So you dropped a pill of burning hop in the room," the detective put in. "That right?"

"A druggist near here is a friend of mine. He let me have the stuff after I'd assured him of my high moral character. And with opium smoke issuing from the keyhole, the rest was made very easy. An officer has a right to enter any place that smells like this, to search for contraband drugs. If noth-

ing is found, no harm is done. The officer would be pursuing his plain duty; that would be all. On the other hand, if instead of opium, he happens to find a million dollars' worth of stolen jewels——" Wray paused with a significant shrug.

Chivington glowered for an instant, and then the harsh lines of his face relaxed, and he grinned rather foolishly, but without resentment. "You put that one over on me!" he said. "But it's all right. I'm the last chap in town to get sore when the joke's on me." He cast a glance toward McGee. "Was Danny in on this play?"

"You mean, did he have anything to do with the theft of the dress?" Wray shook his head. "It doesn't seem likely, does it? In the first place, if he'd been guilty, he wouldn't have opened that trunk so willingly. In the second place—— Well, how could he have stolen the dress? He never was given the chance. He's clever with his fingers, but he has his human limitations."

"How about that, Danny?" asked the detective.

McGee looked at his well-kept fingernails, thoughtfully polished them with the side of his other hand, smiled, and gently shook his head.

"Whether you're the one who copped the dress or not, you were certainly hanging around there trying," declared Chivington.

"All I saw him do was to present mademoiselle with a bouquet," put in Wray. "Almost anybody's liable to be smitten by a beautiful dancer and be moved to give her violets."

McGee looked up with a whimsical expression and chuckled under his breath.

"Yeh!" said the detective, intensely sarcastic. "Danny was so smitten with the lady that he collared her purse."

"I found the purse on the sidewalk, after the lady had driven away," McGee corrected mildly, breaking his long si-

lence. "I was taking it down to Center Street, to the lost-property bureau, when your policeman chanced to take me in."

Chivington whistled incredulously and finished with a loud guffaw of amusement.

"It'll be my word against your unworthy suspicion," McGee submitted pleasantly.

"Yeh—a one to ninety-nine shot; your word not being worth even the one per cent." The detective regarded the other man dubiously and gloomily shook his head. "At that, Danny," he admitted, "I wouldn't take the bet, even at those odds. I suppose you'll slick yourself out of this jam, just like you always do."

McGee started to make some reply, but Wray gripped him suddenly by the elbow, warning him to keep silent. "Lock that door again!" whispered the publicity man.

McGee obeyed the order and then, from the direction of the stairway, they heard a low murmur of voices and the sound of ascending footsteps. "I think they're coming," said Wray. "Quick—get out of sight!"

"Who's——" Chivington started to ask, but he was allowed no time for questions.

Wray shouldered him across the room toward the closet, and then caught McAbe and McGee each by an arm, and shoved them after the detective. The three men yielded without protest, permitting themselves to be crowded in through the narrow doorway.

"Quiet!" Wray admonished.

He turned off the gaslight, and then, finding Neila's hand, he led her across the dark room and crouched beside her behind the bureau. As he waited breathlessly, his fingers closed about his companion's slender wrist, he was aware that the footsteps had halted in front of the closed door. There was a brief interval of suspense, and then a key clicked in the lock, the knob was turned,

and the door swung open on its squeaking hinges. The outlines of three figures loomed vaguely in the darkness.

"I forgot it was gas here," some one said in a low, guttural whisper. "A match?"

"Wait; I'll see." The second speaker was a woman.

Wray was flattened against the wall, almost directly under the gas bracket. His hand groped cautiously until he reached the jet. His fingers turned the cock, and with his other hand he suddenly struck a match. "Don't trouble," he said politely, as he applied the flame to the gas.

As the light flared up, Wray turned to scrutinize the intruders. There were two women and a man, and a glance sufficed for recognition. Julius Marat was the man; the women were Madame Rennault and Magya, the dancer.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOLDEN SLIPPERS.

THE newcomers had whirled about at the sound of Wray's drawling voice, and for a moment they stood in petrified astonishment, thunderstruck by the unexpected interruption.

Marat, however, was not long in recovering his wits. He looked over his shoulder and saw the opened trunk and the jeweled dress draped from the hanger. For an instant his face went livid, and then all at once an apoplectic red mounted from his gross neck to his temples.

He turned on Wray in blazing fury. "So!" he roared. "Spying, eh? I'll fix you for this!"

His huge fists doubled, he hunched up his massive shoulders, and was starting to launch himself across the room, but before he was fairly started, a new voice cut into the proceedings.

"Whoa, now!" came the crisp command. "Pretend to be nice!"

Marat's huge bulk pulled up as

though invisible strings had jerked him, and he cast a startled glance over his shoulder. Detective Chivington had emerged from the closet and was leaning against the door, with one hand tucked significantly into his coat pocket. There was a humorous quirk at the corner of his mouth, but his unwinking eyes glinted with icy menace. Marat caught a hoarse breath and did not budge.

"I take it," said Chivington, "that these folks are in on the dress racket. Oh, naughty! They must have come here to see what was in the trunk."

Wray had turned curiously to scrutinize Mademoiselle Magya, and he had no reply to make. The swift turn of events seemed to have been too much for the dancer's nerves. She had looked at Wray and Neila Lester and had seen Chivington and Samuel McAbe step out of the closet. Then, as though a sudden faintness had overcome her, she tottered forward half a pace and sank limply on the edge of the bed.

With a repressed cry Madame Rennault ran to the dancer's side and stood over her protectingly, a sullen defiance in her eyes.

Wray reached into his pocket and drew forth two gold-cloth dance slippers. He turned them over in his hand and addressed no one in particular. "These are the 'lefts' of two pairs of pumps," he remarked. "They're different sizes. One's a three; the other's a five.

"One of these shoes was danced in to-night—a dance called *Ignis Fatuus*. There was a resin cloth spread on the stage to prevent the dancer from slipping. The marks of resin are on the sole of this shoe—the smaller one, the 'three.' The larger shoe bears no trace of resin." He held out the smaller slipper, offering it to Mademoiselle Magya. "This is the dancer's pump. Will you try it on, mademoiselle?"

Magya shrank away from him and

covered her face with her hands. "No!" she said in a choking voice. "Oh, don't!"

Wray's glance shifted to Madame Rennault's feet. "Yes," he said; "the slipper is much too small for Magya. She wouldn't be able to squeeze into it. Her size is 'five.' The other lady is the 'three.' You can see that hers are the little feet." He bowed slightly before Madame Rennault. "This is Cinderella."

McAbe and Chivington had come forward to stare in open-mouthed bewilderment. Apparently neither had any idea of what the publicity man was talking about. Neila Lester possessed the quicker mind, and it seemed that she was beginning to comprehend.

"Then it was the other—on the stage?" the girl asked in amazement.

Wray nodded. "It's obvious. The one who can wear the slipper is the one who must have danced the *Ignis Fatuus*."

"It's a lie!" exploded Marat. "Magya in the whole world is the only one who can do those steps."

"Magya and one other," corrected Wray in his cool, even voice. "Magya's teacher also should be able to dance the *Ignis Fatuus* and finish with the triple pirouette that comes at the end.

"I happen to know something of Magya's history," he went on in the dead silence that had settled over the room. "Magya as a child became the protégée of another great dancer who taught her all of her art. The other dancer was named Esmeralda. Through a scandal of some sort, the details of which I have forgotten, Esmeralda was forced to leave the stage. But she and Magya never separated. Magya became great, but never quite as wonderful as her mentor. You saw that for yourselves to-night."

With an abrupt movement Wray reached to his inner pocket and brought out a faded photograph. "I found this in our files," he said as the others bent

to look. "It's a picture of Esmeralda in her youth. She's older now, but even so— Do you recognize her?"

"Why," gasped McAbe, "it—it's Madame Rennault!"

With a convulsive movement the older woman dropped her arm around Magya's shoulders, and then she turned in mute terror to face her accuser, like a creature at bay.

"You see them together," Wray went on. "They are of about the same height, the same spareness of build, the same swarthy complexion. They both can dance the *Ignis Fatuus*. Neither had ever appeared before in this country. And much can be accomplished with the aid of stage make-up. A dab of rouge here, a slight building up of the nostrils, a hollow shadowing under the eyes, a pencil touch below the cheek bone. The *Ignis Fatuus* calls for a dimming of the stage lights. And with nobody dreaming of such a substitution, nobody would think to scrutinize the dancer too closely. As long as she did her advertised dance, nobody would notice any difference—"

"Wait!" interrupted Chivington. "I'm beginning to get you. This dame here, Mrs. Reynolds—she wore the diamond dress—she put on the dance in the place of the other party, and—now just a second—it's kind of got me buzzing—the one that had on the dress walked off with it, while those Protective-Detective dicks with the shotguns were guarding the one who wasn't wearing any dress—" He shook his head in frank perplexity. "Say, this is getting all tangled."

"You've got it," said Wray. "There's no other possible way to explain the disappearance of the dress. It couldn't have been stripped off Magya, as she claimed, and stolen from the armored car. She didn't have it on at all. It was not in the car when we started back from the theater to the vaults."

"Huh? Hold on! You said back

there at the theater that she was wearing the dress when you left the theater; that nobody could have got it from her then."

"No." Wray shook his head. "If you'll recall, I said the dancer must have been wearing the dress while we were driving back—but I didn't state which dancer. And I didn't say she was in the car with us. She wasn't."

Chivington blinked his eyes in a dazed way. "For Pete's sake!" he ejaculated. "Spill it! What's it all about?" he asked eagerly.

"There was but one possible way to steal that dress," observed Wray. "It's so simple that I can't quite believe we were fooled even for a minute. Madame Rennault was the one who donned the jeweled costume. She came to McAbe's vaults with Marat. She already had put on her make-up, was impersonating Magya. None of us had met Magya before this evening. The lights in the vault were shaded. Besides, our eyes were on the million-dollar frock; the woman was incidental. Naturally it never occurred to us that we were being deceived. We drove to the theater with Madame Rennault, taking it for granted that she was Magya.

"We reached the theater," Wray went on, "and Madame Rennault put on the *Ignis Fatuus* in the place of Magya. Who was to guess that she was not the person she pretended to be? She finished with great applause and came off the stage. Marat helped her to put on the long ermine coat that muffled her face and concealed the jeweled dress. Then we all of us trooped out of the stage door.

"Meanwhile the real Magya was waiting somewhere outside," Wray continued. "Where? Let us say in the passage between the stage door and the mouth of the alley." He glanced at Neila Lester. "Recall how dark it was through there—the turns and areaways and shadowy corners? A regular laby-

rinth! I should say it was along that passage that we lost the dress."

"How?" demanded the girl.

"We've already agreed that nobody could have had a chance to steal the gown from its wearer's back. But suppose a second woman was waiting in hiding—a woman swathed to the chin in an ermine wrap exactly like Madame Rennault's. Let us say this woman is Magya. We pass her. She glides forth to take Marat's arm. Madame Rennault simultaneously slips aside into Magya's hiding place. It is very dark, and the two women have exchanged places silently, in the twinkling of an eye. The rest of us are serenely unaware that anything has happened. Madame Rennault is left behind with her jeweled dress, and for the first time to-night the real Magya is a member of our party. Like Madame Rennault, her face is smeared with grease paint. We help her into the armored car, lock the door, and start away. Magya is sitting beside us, with nothing under her ermine cloak but a blue-silk slip."

Wray heard a choking sound in the direction of the bed, but he paid no attention.

"The rest worked out like a well-rehearsed play," Wray went on. "While the car was waiting at the alley entrance, somebody had fastened a hook to the battery cable. Marat's valet, Paul, probably attended to that job. At any rate, while we were driving across town, the cable was jerked loose, the light in the car went out. That was Magya's signal. With her own hands she tore her ermine wrap. She scratched herself with her nails, and dropped screaming onto the floor. In the darkness and confusion the rest of us could not see what had happened. When we obtained a light, mademoiselle was seated on the floor, apparently in great trouble, wearing no dress."

"You're mad!" sputtered Marat, his fat face ashen with fear.

Wray turned from Magya to look at the man's huge hands. "The finger marks on mademoiselle's throat must have been put there earlier in the evening," he resumed quietly. "When we first saw them they had begun to turn black. Fresh prints would have had a redder color. It was those marks that gave me my first suspicion that all was not as it seemed.

"I think we know who choked Magya," he added, his voice suddenly growing harsh. "Marat, I should think a man of your size would be ashamed to throttle a woman, even with her consent, even for a million dollars."

"It's a lie!" declared the man furiously.

"It is not a lie!" Madame Rennault stepped forward to confront Marat, and her tone was vibrant with passion. "Mr. Wray, he know all that happened, as well as though he had been with us. We try to steal the dress, just as he say. Blame Marat, and me also, if you wish, but do not blame Magya. She did what she did because of her fear of that man."

Madame Rennault leveled an accusing forefinger. "Marat, he choke his wife, but not with her consent. He force us to help him steal the dress. But at the last minute to-night, Magya she refuse. Then Marat, he grab her throat until she is in terror for her life. She have to do as she is told. But please—please don't blame Magya. Marat he made us help, but he is the thief!"

CHAPTER XIV.

WITHOUT PREJUDICE.

WHILE Madame Rennault delivered her bitter accusation, Detective Chivington had sauntered across the room to place his back against the door. He measured Marat's wilting bulk with deep contempt.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it happened just like that," he remarked.

"I have my dress back," broke in McCabe. "That's the main thing. Of course I'd like to see this man get his deserts, but as for these ladies——"

"Prosecute!" advised the detective. "We'll stretch the big bozo for a flock of annuals. And I think we can bring the ladies off with a reprimand. We'll try."

Chivington looked quizzically at Wray. "It was a nifty little game," he remarked, "but you stepped livelier than they did. I still don't figure out how you knew where they'd hid the dress."

"Put yourself in their place," suggested Wray. "You're planning to steal a frock adorned with a million dollars' worth of jewels. Your first thought would be of a safe place to cache the stolen goods."

Chivington nodded in agreement.

"You're a stranger in a strange country," Wray went on. "You wouldn't know where to find a fence—a receiver of stolen property. The robbery is planned for nighttime. The banks aren't open late at night. You wouldn't rent a safety-deposit box, because you might not be able to get into the vault at this hour, and, besides, it might prove dangerous. You wouldn't dare leave the dress in your hotel apartment. The police might take a notion to search the place. Nevertheless, you must dispose of your loot temporarily, where you can put hands on it any time you wanted it. In such a situation, what would you do?"

"I guess I'd rent a room somewhere," replied Chivington.

"In a dark side street," supplemented Wray, "where you could come and go without danger of recognition.

"Miss Lester will tell you that it would be almost impossible to identify the individual stones making up the dress," Wray pursued. "But the dress itself would be easily recognized. There's no other like it in the world.

A dangerous thing to have in your possession! You wouldn't want to lose any time in stripping off the stones and destroying the frock."

"I follow you," said the detective.

"How would you get rid of the dress?"

"Burn it," answered Chivington without hesitation.

"On somebody's floor?"

The detective glanced across the room toward the open hearth and grinned in understanding. "I'd rent me a dump with a fireplace in it."

"So that was why!" exclaimed Neila. "I couldn't imagine why you were leading us about the streets, searching for a fireplace."

"I tried to put myself in Marat's position," said Wray; "to think as he would think. When we struck this house, and I learned that a man and woman had been here this afternoon, asking to rent a room with a fireplace—on a warm day like this—I was certain that we had found the dress."

"But what brought you to this neighborhood, rather than another," Neila asked, "and what made you suspect that this was the right house—before you learned that the fireplace room had been let?"

"This street is just around the corner from the hotel where the Marats are living," answered Wray. "When we arrived at the apartment, Madame Rennault was there ahead of us. We hadn't been many minutes on our way from the theater, even with our stop on Forty-second Street. In that time, however, Madame Rennault had gone to the rented room, taken off the jeweled frock, locked it in a trunk, put on another dress, washed off her make-up, and returned to the Marats' apartment—all before we got there. It was evident that this room could not be very far from the hotel."

"That's logical," agreed the girl. "The hiding place had to be in this neighbor-

hood. But you knew the very house that——"

"We tried one other house before we arrived here," Wray reminded her. "Remember the melting cake of ice on the sidewalk, and the puddle of mud it made? And out in front here workmen are putting in a new sidewalk, and the ground has been muddied by a leaking hose."

He again brought out the gold-cloth slippers and exhibited the muddy streak on the instep of the smaller one. "It hasn't rained in weeks, and the sidewalks everywhere are bone-dry. So our search was considerably narrowed. We were looking for a mud puddle into which a woman would be apt to step as she alighted from her taxicab. That helped us some."

"You were lucky in finding the right puddle," remarked Chivington. "A long chance you took there."

"So I realized," admitted Wray. "That's why I asked Lieutenant Dean to have a couple of shadows follow these people, in case we had ambushed ourselves in the wrong house." He nodded toward the front window. "I imagine there are some men from your precinct watching this house now. If you should need help at any time you can open the window and whistle."

"Say, you didn't overlook much, did you?" Chivington surveyed Wray with one eye half shut. "And, do you know, there were a few minutes to-night when I thought you were completely cuckoo? Back there in the theater, when you stood in the aisle and pretended you were McGee with his bunch of violets—what was the idea of that little performance?"

"That was just a pretext," Wray answered. "I merely wanted an excuse to ask Madame Rennault to step in front of the footlights. You can always recognize a professional by the manner of walking across a stage. The instant she struck that pose for us, I knew we could

not be mistaken, that she must indeed be the old-time Esmeralda."

McAbe had gone to the trunk and draped the jeweled dress over his arm. "Thanks to you," he said to Wray, "my partner will find these stones in the vault to-morrow. I think we'd better call a taxi and take this back to the store."

"And I think this time we'll be safer without quite so many guards," put in

Neila. "Are you coming with us?" she asked, glancing at Wray, and added with a ghost of a twinkle in her eyes: "Eh, big brother?"

Wray turned with a smile. "That 'brother' stuff is out from now on," he declared. "Something tells that I'll be dropping around to see you to-morrow, and we're going to start with a clean slate, without any family prejudice between us."



SONGS OF THE CRAFTS

THE TRUCK DRIVER

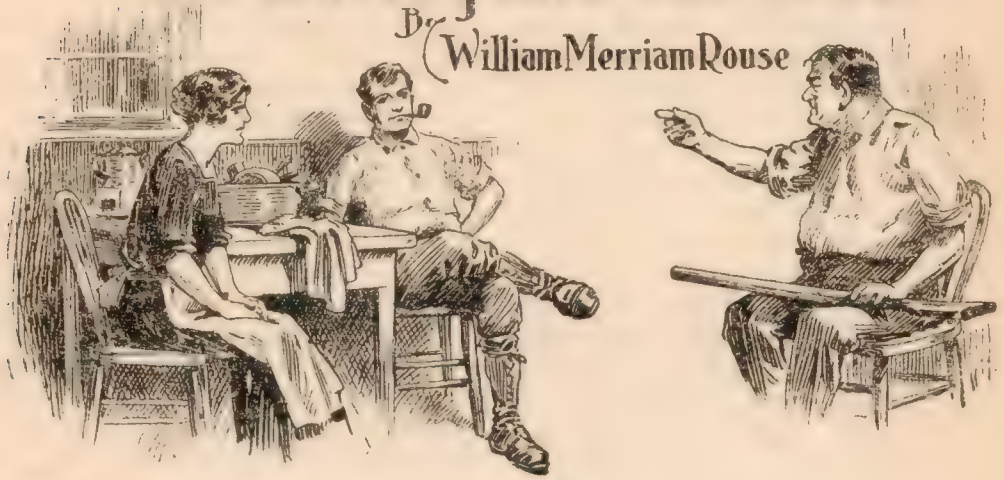
By Ted Olson

FREIGHTING in from railroad's end—it isn't what it used to be
 When sage old-timers thought dad's mules were anything but slow;
 Twenty flop-eared sinners, plugging steady for their dinners,
 With thirty weary miles behind, and sixty yet to go.
 Now the trail's a moving cloud ground up by pounding wheels;
 Now the desert air is dense with reek of oil and gas;
 And piloting a behemoth that plunges, snorts, and reels,
 I bring the wide world in through Gunsight Pass.

Freighting in from railroad's end—three arid, baking days of it;
 Camping in the alkali wherever daylight died.
 Dad he packed a rifle—Sharps—and thought it just a trifle
 To drop a prowling Navajo who'd aimed to lift his hide.
 Dad would blink to see the way we put the miles behind—
 Breakfast at the Harvey House, and home again by night.
 And now the Indians that you meet are all the college kind
 Who mooch you for the "makin's" and a light.

Freighting in from railroad's end—it isn't so romantic now;
 It's mostly grime and dust instead of powder smoke and blood.
 And though his mules' contrary ways taxed dad's vocabulary
 He never wrestled with a truck hub-down in gumbo mud.
 Maybe, though, dad's job and mine are pretty much the same.
 Maybe he saw rather more of labor than of thrills,
 And stuck, like me, because he liked to beat the desert's game,
 And bring the big world in across the hills.

∴ *Tale of Bildad Road* ∴
The Shotgun Princess -
By **William Merriam Rouse**



DOUBLE - BARRELED, muzzle-loading shotgun rested upon two wooden pegs which protruded from the neatly whitewashed plaster of the kitchen wall. Both barrels were loaded with ample charges of buckshot, and two percussion caps gleamed with sinister brightness under the ornate hammers. Dark and menacing, the shotgun lay blackly along that immaculate wall, and by its presence prevented Doris Wilkins from getting married.

With that fearsome weapon, capable at close range of blowing a hole through the side of a house, Orla Wilkins guarded his sister from all young men who approached with serious intentions. Wilkins was large and smiling, one of those doughy men who lump out their clothes in the wrong places. He was able to hold his own in a fight with most of the stalwart sons of the Bildad Road neighborhood; but he was also much opposed to exertion, and it was far less trouble to point a shotgun than it was to swing a fist.

Wilkins had said, with his china-doll smile, that he would rather do manslaughter than lose a good housekeeper.

Bildad Road believed him; at least sufficiently so that no man had yet been found who was willing to put the matter to the final test. Everybody knew that for the thirty-seven years of his life Orla had been nourished upon the famous Wilkins apple pie, first by his mother and then by his sister, and everybody realized that for a man who thought as much of his stomach as Orla Wilkins did, this was a life-and-death issue. He was the kind of brother-in-law no man would want.

Doris was something like the fresh apple pie that she made—young and sweet, tender and delicious. She was spiced with twinkles in her brown eyes and curls in her brown hair; where her colossal brother was pudgy, she was small and delicately curved and swift moving.

Some of the girls of Bildad Road would have treated such a brother to crockery or stovewood over the head, but Doris was as amiable as sunshine. Wilkins, knowing when he was well off, provided her with the best from the general store at the Corners, and until the coming of Johnny Trumbull she bowed cheerfully to fate; content to be

the shotgun princess of Bildad, cherished and guarded for the sake of her delectable cooking.

On a snapping cold night in December this Johnny Trumbull sat in the Wilkins' kitchen and meditated upon the Wilkins' shotgun. By actual measurements he was a rather small man; something like fifty pounds lighter than Orla Wilkins and half a foot shorter. But Trumbull did not give the impression of being inferior in size, and it was only when he stood side by side with a genuine Bildad Roder that his stature was noticeably under the neighborhood average. His eye gleamed steadily, like a blue beacon, and he moved with a careless ease that was pleasant to watch. Doris was watching him now; her brother was, too, with a pale smile and a warning in his dull gaze.

Trumbull did not need to study the face of Orla Wilkins to know approximately what was going on behind it; he had been obliged to see that piecrust-colored countenance every time he came for the purpose of getting better acquainted with Doris, and he understood the feelings of Wilkins only too well. Wilkins never left his sister alone for a moment with any man under seventy-five.

Johnny Trumbull had come to the neighborhood a month before, and since he had got acquainted with Doris he had never been able to find her alone; whenever he went to the house, Orla Wilkins opened the door and settled himself in a creaking armchair. Tonight there were little sparks in the eyes of Trumbull; he felt reasonably sure that the dimple would not appear so often in the cheek of Doris unless she were glad to see him, and he decided to find out just how much of Wilkins was reputation.

"Miss Wilkins," began Trumbull after a considerable lull in the con-

versation, "do you care if I call you 'Doris?'"

"Why——" She turned apple-blossom pink, and the dimple twinkled at him as she answered, in a low voice: "I don't believe I care if you do."

A crease appeared straight up and down in the middle of the large brow of Orla Wilkins. He shifted, his chair creaked, and two well-padded hands took hold of the arms as though he might rise suddenly. Trumbull looked at him and grinned; then he spoke to Doris again:

"Much obliged! So far we've talked mostly about the price of cordwood and the weather. It's going to help to call you Doris. Maybe you'd like to go to the next dance at the Corners with me, Doris?"

Her lips parted, but it was the voice of Orla Wilkins that replied; a voice as thick and heavy as molasses and as unpleasantly sticky:

"She don't like to go to dances. Nor anything else that keeps her out nights. Not with anybody!"

Doris said nothing. She looked down at the red-and-white checks of the cloth upon the table beside which she sat; her fingers traced out the design, but her eyes flashed once under long lashes at Johnny Trumbull and gave him encouragement to go on.

"Well," said Trumbull, "I don't like Sunday-school picnics very much, but anything would be nice with Doris. They're going to have an indoor picnic in the Grange Hall, and maybe I can take her to that."

"She don't like picnics, neither," Wilkins told him, with the crease in his forehead growing deeper. "Nor coasting parties. Nor any doings that take her out anywhere, any time. She's a home body."

"That's nice," said Trumbull, with a glance at Doris, "even if it is hard on me. I take it you're a home body, too, Wilkins."

"I be!" replied Wilkins firmly. "And I calculate to be!"

Wilkins was trying to wear him out, of course, as he had worn out other young men callers. The difference was that Trumbull sometimes wore rough instead of ragged. He decided to force the situation to a break; and the eyes of Doris did not seem to forbid him.

II.

I'VE always thought I'd like to marry a home body," remarked Trumbull, giving a hitch to his belt. "And I don't mean you, Wilkins."

What followed was a little startling. Orla Wilkins rose from his chair with a quickness surprising in a man who looked so clumsy. He took down the shotgun that Trumbull had observed and heard about and sat down again with the barrels of the gun resting across his knees in the general direction of Trumbull. The silent menace which that old muzzle-loader had seemed to give off had not been imaginary.

"Doris don't want to get married," said Wilkins grimly. "Not to-night, nor any time."

Trumbull looked at the black muzzles, the big thumb of Wilkins as it pulled back the hammers, and up into the man's eyes. They were flat and impenetrable, dulled by much eating. They might mean business, and they might not. It is an uncomfortable feeling to have a double-barreled shotgun, said to be loaded with buckshot, pointed at one's middle.

"Let's get down to brass tacks," said Trumbull, with a slight growl in his voice. "Just what for are you pointing that shooting iron at me?"

"Because I can set down to shoot," Wilkins told him, without any change of expression of tone. "If I was to lick you it would be a lot of work, and most likely we'd bust some furniture."

"Bah!" Trumbull barked a laugh.

"You don't think you can kill a man and get away with it, do you? You're a bluff!"

"This here is my house," replied Wilkins heavily, "and if you was to make a move I didn't like, and I was to shoot you, it ain't likely they could prove anything except self-defense. Doris wouldn't swear her own brother into jail. A man has got an awful strong holt on the law when he's in his own house."

Maybe he would shoot. Johnny Trumbull did not like the cloudiness of that large face. He glanced at Doris and saw that she had gone pale; her little fingers were white against the edge of the table. She ought to know her brother better than anybody else.

"You won't have to shoot me in self-defense," returned Trumbull, and he began deliberately to fill his pipe.

"Ain't you going to get out?" asked Wilkins.

"No!" thundered Trumbull suddenly. "Shoot a helpless man if you want to!"

There was dead silence for a while after that; broken at last by a faint gasp of relief from Doris that nothing had happened. Wilkins sat motionless and expressionless, and Trumbull puffed calmly at his pipe.

"The first time you make a motion toward me or my sister that gives me an excuse," announced Wilkins at length, "I'll blow a hole in you that a dog could jump through!"

"The first time I catch you without that gun you'll have to fight," Trumbull replied. "I don't care whether it tires you all out or not."

"Don't have any trouble with him, Johnny!" exclaimed Doris. "Last year two husky fellows got between him and his gun, and he half killed them before he threw them out!"

"I'll take a chance if he'll put up the gun," returned Trumbull.

Wilkins grunted what might have been intended for a laugh of scorn; he

did not take the trouble to make answer to that offer. Trumbull smoked and watched the shotgun and wondered just what he was going to do next. He might have been allowed to come again if he had not brought on the crisis to-night. Now he knew that he would have a great deal of difficulty getting into the Wilkins' home, once he had gone out. How long could he sit here? And what good would it do him if he sat here forever?

III.

TRUMBULL looked across the table at Doris. There was a warmth in her eyes as they met his that communicated itself to his heart; she wanted to save him from harm. He would have given a month's wages to know how much more than sympathy she felt for him. A lovely, rounded forearm was lying upon the table, with fingers drumming against the cloth. A man would be mad to let a shotgun stand between him and a girl like this!

Trumbull looked at the gun. It pointed toward his stomach, and he experienced an inward shudder at the thought of what would happen if the fingers of Orla Wilkins pressed a little harder against the triggers; or just one of the triggers. Trumbull would not live to know anything about the second barrel.

He began to get extremely angry and stubborn. No half-baked reflection on the human race was going to drive him away from the girl he wanted to marry without a fight! But how could a dead man fight? He was a good deal more than half convinced that the first movement toward battle on his part would fill his ears with the roar of doom.

Trumbull would not go, and he could not do anything else, except stay. The possibilities of just staying grew upon him as a sunrise grows. Suppose he were just to stay put where he was for

an hour, twelve hours? Wilkins would not dare to shoot him in cold blood; punishment would be too nearly sure. Trumbull leaned back in his chair, tamped the tobacco down in his pipe, and chuckled.

"Ain't it about time you was going home?" asked Wilkins.

"I don't intend to go home. Never! I like it too well where Doris is!"

Trumbull caught a gleam in the eye of the girl; the slit in the lower part of Wilkins' face tightened grimly.

"You're going to pay for this!" he grunted. "Doris! It's time for my snack. Go get me some of them fresh doughnuts and cheese, and maybe a little apple sauce and a pitcher of cider."

Doris Wilkins made a movement to rise, and Trumbull stopped her with a look; into that look he tried to throw all that was in his heart.

"Don't feed the critter, Doris!" he said earnestly. "That is, if you're just a little bit on my side of this game; don't feed him until he puts down that gun and gives me a chance at him!"

"Doris!" bellowed Wilkins. "You get me that stuff to eat!"

"Don't do it unless you want to see him drive me out!" exclaimed Trumbull.

For a tense moment she seemed to hesitate; then Doris sank into her chair with a toss of her head and a little spot of color in each cheek. "It's about time I had something to say for myself!" she cried. "I'll feed both of you when you promise not to quarrel any more!"

Johnny Trumbull grinned at his enemy. The face of Wilkins became troubled. He leaned forward and spoke pleadingly to his sister.

"You know my stomach is used to having something every night just about this time," he said. "You never acted this way before."

"Put up that gun, then, and be friends with Mr. Trumbull!"

There was a quality in the voice of

Doris Wilkins which was final. Trumbull guessed that her brother had never heard it before, for now his lower jaw sagged a trifle as he stared at her. His finger did not waver upon the trigger of the shotgun, but small beads of perspiration showed upon his forehead, and the end of a pale tongue ran around his lips. He was touched in his weakest spot.

"Trumbull," he said huskily, "there's trouble here, and I want you should go. I'll—I'll even pay you to go!"

"Money couldn't hire me to leave!" Trumbull chuckled.

Wilkins rediscovered his courage. He swept them both with a baleful look. "All right! I'll starve to-night, but when I settle with you, Trumbull, it's going to be terrible!"

Trumbull drew inspiration from his success. He turned carefully so that his movement might not be misinterpreted and smiled at Doris. "If you handed me a doughnut and a piece of cheese I guess I could eat without getting shot."

The small feet of Doris tripped into the pantry, and a moment later Trumbull was munching slowly before the yearning gaze of Wilkins. He ate his doughnut to the last crumb.

"That's another debt you've got to pay!" muttered Wilkins.

IV.

TWO hours passed; three, four. Midnight struck. Still the two men sat facing each other. Trumbull's occasional baiting of Wilkins lost its flavor; the head of Doris sank slowly to the table after many false starts, and she slept there.

Trumbull had made himself as comfortable as possible by sliding down in his chair. Wilkins remained very nearly motionless, with the gun across his knees and his eyes brooding. There was no doubt that his suffering for food was genuine; he had trained his stomach

to expect a gorging at regular and frequent intervals.

Trumbull dozed at intervals and then jerked himself awake. Time and again through the night he saw the gaze of Wilkins travel longingly in the direction of the pantry. Trumbull began to wonder why he did not drop the gun and fight it out instead of suffering. There must be some reason—was it possible that he was so lazy he would rather starve than exert himself?

Morning came and found them like this—Wilkins a trifle gray around the mouth, Trumbull slumped down in his chair, and Doris asleep. The lamps grew sickly in the light of a bright winter day; the big wooden clock on the mantel ticked monotonously. The fire had long since gone out, and it was cold in the room. Trumbull straightened up and stretched, bringing an answering movement from Wilkins.

"Doris!" said Trumbull. "I hate to wake you up, but I'm afraid you'll catch cold if you don't build a fire. Orla won't build it for you, and I can't!"

Doris lifted her head, sleepy and smiling as she saw Trumbull and remembered. She rubbed her eyes and made a dash for the mirror over the kitchen sink.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, as she turned from a brief patting and rearranging of her brown hair. "I always get up and build the fire, so Orla won't have to dress in the cold."

"Huh!" Trumbull looked with fresh disfavor upon the man he had decided to have for his brother-in-law. "Unless Orla starves himself to death and ends it that way, he's going to get up and build fires after this!"

"Ain't you two going to give me any breakfast?" demanded Wilkins.

"Nope!" replied Trumbull cheerfully. "You're never going to eat again unless you put up that gun and act decent."

"Then, by the great Jehoshaphat, I'll starve!" flared Wilkins. "If I don't

get the best of you now, Doris'll be fool enough to marry you, and I might as well be dead, anyway, as to have a hired housekeeper that can't cook fit for the hogs! Either I'll get rid of you, or I'll starve to death right where I be!"

"What do you want for breakfast, Johnny—I mean Mr. Trumbull?" asked Doris; Trumbull's heart thrilled.

"Taking orders from him!" barked her brother. "If I get drove too far, I'll shoot anyway!"

"Ham and eggs and strong coffee," replied Trumbull, with a watchful eye upon Wilkins. "You'll have to hand me mine on a plate, for with him as hungry as he is right now I wouldn't call it safe for me to move over to the table."

While the savory odors of ham and coffee filled the kitchen, the eyes of Orla Wilkins grew more deepset and glaring. Yet he held out, even when Trumbull ate slowly and heartily before his famished gaze.

When Trumbull had drunk his last cup of coffee, and Wilkins still sat with his finger on a trigger of the shotgun, the situation began to look serious. Wilkins might be as pig-headed as he was hungry; and he was becoming more dangerous each minute. Trumbull saw Doris regard her brother with a worried look, and he knew that something must be done to break the deadlock. He resolved to take one last desperate chance, pinning his faith entirely upon the weakness of Orla Wilkins.

V.

DORIS," Trumbull said, "I know you must be tired, but we've got to get this finished. I wish you'd make me a pie out of the best apples you've got in the cellar. A kind of extra-special pie, with lots of cinnamon and sugar and juice and a flaky crust with just a touch of light brown here and there. A pie that'll make a man's mouth water as far as he can see and smell it."

"Oh!" She stared at him, and then she laughed. "All right! I'll bake a pie that would take first prize at the county fair."

Doris Wilkins kept her promise. The pie that she set on the table an hour later was a masterpiece of pie making. Fresh from the oven, it gave off sweet and spicy odors which floated upon the air of the kitchen and fairly thickened it with temptation. Through holes in the top one could see hints of the interior lusciousness. Doris touched the crust with a fork, and it broke in little flakes that would melt in a man's mouth.

Orla Wilkins could get to that pie and still keep his man covered, but he could not feed himself without putting the shotgun down. He seemed to realize that Johnny Trumbull was a very swift-moving man and that relaxation for an instant would mean that Trumbull would have his grip upon the gun.

Wilkins leaned forward, trying to look at the pie and Trumbull at the same time. A little moisture appeared at one corner of his mouth; his fat chin trembled. His face was ravaged by hate and hunger. Twice he started to get up, only to think better of it; once he lifted the shotgun slightly and his finger curled more firmly around the trigger.

That was a bad moment for Johnny Trumbull. He knew it might easily be that he had pressed Wilkins to the brink of murder; he knew that the man was made savage by a sleepless night of hunger, fearful of the loss of his life-long comfort, and fairly venomous against the stranger who had come crashing in to take the heart of Doris.

For just that moment the situation hung on the edge of tragedy; with Doris standing breathless and white and Trumbull staring, dry-mouthed, into the eyes of Wilkins. Then, suddenly, Orla Wilkins let forth an incoherent cry of suffering and defeat and flung himself in the direction of the pie. The shot-

gun slid harmlessly to the floor. Trumbull seized it and threw it out of doors into the snow. Then he whirled to face Wilkins.

Wilkins had broken the pie into two pieces, and at that instant he stood with his face half buried in one of them. Trumbull swung the table out of the way and stripped off his coat.

"Now!" he cried. "Stand up and fight like a man!"

The jaws of Orla Wilkins ceased to work. His eyes met Trumbull's over a piece of pie crust; they shifted and flickered, and he swallowed hastily.

"I don't know as you and me need to

have any trouble!" he mumbled. "Not if you'll let her cook for me once in a while. I dunno but maybe you could both live here, if you wanted to."

The arms of Johnny Trumbull dropped to his sides. Was this the two-hundred-pound terror who had thrashed two husky men single-handed and thrown them out only the year before?

"What's the matter with him?" asked Trumbull, turning to Doris.

"It's you—Johnny!" whispered Doris, with pink and lovely cheeks. "You've got more nerve than he has! And, anyway, he can't fight on an empty stomach. I knew that."



THE DESERT RAT

By Edgar Daniel Kramer

THOUGH folks find the desert lonely, though they fear the wastes of sand,
The desert rat turns toward it, as a lad turns to a lass,
For he hearkens to far voices that few ever understand—
Siren voices that come to him in the breezes as they pass.

Weather-whitened, to the music of his tinkling burro bells,
He fares out into the stillness with a vision in his eyes,
For the desert lures his gray years with the witching tales it tells
Of a Land of Promise laughing to the kisses of the skies.

He goes tramping to the eastward, he goes trudging to the west,
While the alkali is lifting to the tread of weary feet,
And the dust cloaks man and burros, bent upon the endless quest,
While his parched lips taste the honey that his dreams make strangely sweet.

To the things that others value, oh, his eyes are worse than blind
As he stands before the glories that the desert wastes unroll;
As he fares on in his seeking for what all wise men would find—
The secrets of the pale stars and an understanding soul.

When the day is slowly dying and the dusk is trembling down,
As he smokes beside the fire wearied by the miles he trod,
Far away from life's mad scheming and the crowded streets of town,
In the silence he is smiling, as he hears the voice of God.

Off Guard ~

By
(George F. Peabody ~)



(COMPLETE IN
THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

NOT ON THE TEAM.

THE young moon, shining through new leaves in Kenton College campus, found things of interest besides those leaves and the soft young grass where it wove a carpet of gossamer loveliness. Near the fountain wherein a school of goldfish, joyous in new freedom, flashed through shimmering green water and leaped with the moonbeams, sat Dan Lorrie and beside him, Doris Payne.

Yet for them the languorous magic of the night held no conscious charm. Moodily the man stared into the pool, failing even to see the exquisite faint gold sparkles as the playing fish darted through patches of wet moonlight. And Doris had eyes for nothing but the shoulders of Dan Lorrie. However, no hint of admiration lay in those eyes dark as the blue night sky. Just now they were snapping with anger barely controlled. Her voice was cold, like the water dripping from the bronze fountain.

"You weigh one hundred and ninety pounds, Dan Lorrie, and your shoulders are almost a yard wide. You've got terrible strength—you must have—and yet when your college gets in a pinch

like this and needs that muscle you won't use it! You've never tried to make even one of the teams. Shame! We lost to Lambert Tech in football, they beat us in basketball, and they'll take the track meet, too.

"We did have a chance to win the wrestling match, but 'Porky' Flynn had to break an arm," Doris went on. "You know that Coach Bemis has appealed to the school to find another heavyweight and find him quick—we've got only two weeks. I've looked them all over, and I don't believe there's another man in Kenton who could take Porky's place unless it's you, Dan Lorrie—and you refuse!"

The student turned and looked down into her flushed face. "Doris," he said, "how come you're so steamed up about this wrestling match? Wrestling is a man's game. Rather odd for a girl, a little bit of a pink-shell girl like you, to get all fussed up this way over it."

"I'm loyal to my college." She spoke sharply. "We've got to beat Lambert in something, and besides that—Well, there's a bit of family pride in it. It happens that my good old dad helped to make the traditions of Kenton. He earned his letter on the wrestling team and for three straight years won the heavyweight match from Lambert."

Dan Lorrie was startled. "Is that

picture down in the gym—is that your father?"

"Yes; it is," she told him proudly. "And he's coming all the way from Denver to see the match this year. He's having some trouble with a gang of thieves who are giving undue attention to his silver mines; but he's going to leave just the same, and in time to make a stay of it here before the meet. Oh, I wish I were a man!"

"I'm glad you're not!" The words slipped out before the student could check them.

"Don't talk like that to me," she told him frigidly. Then as a new thought struck she leaned close and tried it. "Please, Dan, for me won't you try? I'd be so happy to introduce you to dad as the man who's defending his old place on the team. And it might—it might make a lot of difference," she said shyly, her round face pink. Then she finished: "You know Coach Bemis has got a professional to come down here to help train the boys these last two weeks. Even if you don't know the game he'll teach you enough in that time to win."

Lorrie stirred uneasily. It was difficult for him to refuse her when Doris chose to plead. "Who is this professional?" he hedged at last.

"I don't know—nobody does. That's not important. He's probably well enough known without his mask but is going about incognito as a drawing card. Dad says it's done frequently. Anyway, he's a wonder, I hear. Two weeks ago, according to Bemis, he wrestled the world's champion and nearly threw him. A man like that can do a lot in two weeks. Please, Dan?"

Lorrie all but groaned in his misery. Desperately he wanted to burst out with an explanation but dared not. All he could do was grind a heel into the soft turf and mumble: "I—I can't do it, Doris! I can't!"

Instantly the softness left her man-

ner. Her eyes flashed again, she drew away from him, and her voice became frosty. "I think, Mr. Lorrie, that you mean you are afraid! I'm going up to the dorm now, and, further, I don't think I want to go to that concert tomorrow night. And Saturday dad will be here. I don't think he'd care to meet you. My phone will be busy, and I'll have no time for letters. In plain language, Mr. Lorrie, you and I are through!" Her anger was mounting, and, lest it get entirely beyond control, she jumped up and started down the path.

"Doris! Wait! You can't leave me like this!" The words, pain laden, revealed something of his feelings for the slim girl.

She stopped, turned, and speared him with a withering look. "One doesn't have faith in, nor use for, a coward!" The remark was born of disdainful fury and left him shivering on the park bench while Doris marched off through the moonlight.

CHAPTER II.

"HOOKING" A STUDENT.

SUNDAY morning, after chapel service, found Dan Lorrie once more at the campus fountain watching the goldfish. He was alone, but that was characteristic—he was always alone; a solitary figure through all the years of his college life. Reserved and taciturn, he roomed alone at the edge of town and made no effort to attract companionship; in fact, he repelled it. He did not belong to a fraternity; he had nothing at all to do with athletics. His mind seemed centered on just one thing—to get all the learning and the mental training the college could possibly give. He stood exceptionally high in his studies.

Among those in his own class who knew him slightly, Lorrie was thought of as a silent, uninteresting, bookish

fellow bent on missing all the fun that goes with college. Of girls he had a horror, seemingly, with the exception of Doris Payne, and probably he should never have met her if she hadn't literally "hooked" him. Doris, keen for all sports, had been casting for bass in Black River early one morning long before matrons or professors were up, and let fly with the plug just as Lorrie in a canoe swept around the point of a little island. Several of the hooks engaged the young man's trousers. Out of the resulting chagrin on her part and the perfect embarrassment on his came a warm friendship. Doris found that there was depth and charm and purpose tucked away behind the silence of Dan Lorrie.

It was all over now, he thought moodily and watched the drifting goldfish in the pool. A gay laugh startled him, and, looking up, he saw Doris, between two men, coming up the path. Lorrie started again. The huge gray-haired man with the jolly face must be her father—one of Kenton's heroes of another day. The other man was "Ted" Fisher, star middleweight on Kenton's wrestling team. With a stab of jealousy Lorrie saw Doris' left arm hooked through Fisher's right, while her bright glance took turns in tilting up at her father's smiling face or the wrestler's flushed one.

For one fleeting second Lorrie caught her eye. Then they passed within a yard and none of the three noticed him. A bitter smile crooked its way across Lorrie's face; then he stuffed his hands into his pockets and sauntered away.

Monday night the student body stormed the gym. Everybody wanted to see the famous "Masked Marvel" teach the college boys some tricks. Even Dan Lorrie was there, but nobody noticed him. He stood in a corner near the door and seemed hunting among the spectators for some one. Presently, in the balcony, just opposite the mat he

spied them—Doris and her father. Beside them, in a dressing gown, sat Ted Fisher.

"Certainly making the best of his chance," Lorrie said in a low voice to himself.

"What's that?" asked the student next to him.

"Nothing!" growled Lorrie as he turned and bolted through the door.

Fifteen minutes later Coach Bemis came in, and behind him stalked a towering figure in a worn dressing robe. A rustle went through the crowd; a rustle and a whisper. "There he is! Ah, The Masked Marvel!"

From the edge of his close-cut hair to the tip of his nose a black mask, held by adhesive tape, hid the stranger's face. The masked giant paid no heed to the crowd, and the coach wasted no time in introductions. Evidently the marvel was in a hurry.

First came the featherweights, and the masked man moved close to the mat side. He stood with folded arms while his keen eyes sparkled through the mask and took in every move of the flying forms struggling on the canvas mat. In about ten minutes Tommy Bogart, first stringer, had pinned his opponent's shoulders and leaped up. The marvel turned to the coach, and his voice was so low nobody in the balcony heard.

"This boy needs no help from me. He's a mighty clever lad. Strong, fast, and he knows some good tricks." Bemis smiled. He had counted on Bogart to win; but it was good to hear a professional praise him. As the little fellow got into a robe the masked man spoke softly to him.

"Bear down on those holds, my boy. Go at 'em as though you meant it. If you get a hammer lock make your man think you're going to break his arm, and if he doesn't roll over, push 'er up a little farther. Once a guy who knows the game finds out you won't really hurt him you're licked."

"Thank you, sir," replied Bogart, pleased at having impressed.

With the lightweights who followed, the marvel found some fault and spent much time showing them how better to apply the punishing holds. With the welters the same was true, and he used fifteen minutes drilling Dunton on a half nelson and crotch grip, following this with a demonstration of arm bars and wrist locks.

All this had been done with his robe still on and the crowd was growing impatient. Whenever the marvel bent his body they could see the long muscles swell beneath the cloth, and they wanted to see them bared; more, they wanted to see him on the mat showing some of the amazing speed and fearful strength that gossip said was his. When Ted Fisher and another middleweight stepped onto the canvas, the throng got its wish.

"Which one is your regular?" the masked man asked Bemis.

"This one," said the coach, laying a hand on the star's shoulders. "This is Mr. Fisher, the best man on our squad."

"All right, Mr. Fisher, I'll work with you," the masked one announced and stepped out of his robe.

Again a rustle went through the crowd, and here and there short exclamations were smothered. The man's body was a thing of beauty. His neck was not of the stocky, bullish type, so typical of wrestlers, but one instantly sensed the power in it. The neck rose straight from an astonishing pair of shoulders where at every movement great muscles moved sinuously under the skin. Over his deep chest lay other muscles like thick shields, and his powerful arms and legs would have well served as models to some ancient Grecian sculptor in those days when gods walked with men.

"Whew," cried Doris' father, "but there's a man!"

There was frank admiration in the

girl's eyes, too; but in her mind was the picture of another young giant sweeping a canoe upstream easily while she lay watching the perfect rhythm of his great shoulders.

"Yes," she agreed in a murmur; "but I know a fellow, who——" Then she stopped.

"What? What's that? Pardon, Doris, but I was thinking of that masked fellow out there and didn't catch it."

"Nothing, dad; nothing at all." Doris cut the words off short and her face was pink. She was angered that she had thought so easily of Dan Lorrie.

In a moment, though, she forgot him. Things were happening on the canvas mat. Ted Fisher, anxious to show well before Doris and her father, went at The Masked Marvel like a whirlwind. Fisher was a powerful man for his weight, and in less than three minutes it was evident that he was trying desperately to throw the unknown. The big man obligingly dropped to his hands and knees to give the student his chance.

"By George," chuckled Sam Payne, "that Fisher's a plucky lad! Strong too. See him go, Doris! Jove, but this takes me back to the old days! Right on this same floor—— Ah-h, look!"

Excited shouts rang all around the gallery. "Go for 'im, Ted!" Hold 'im, Fish!" "You got 'im, boy!"

Indeed it looked as if Fisher were going to triumph. He had suddenly taken a half nelson and leg hold and stood the masked man on his head.

Hardly, however, had the first shout died away when the crowd saw a whirl of white flesh and black tights, and Fisher stood empty-handed, staring stupidly at his opponent who, a dozen feet away, was right side up again.

"Ah-h!" commented Sam Payne for the second time. "Beautiful; beautifully done, Doris," and he started a volley of handclapping.

"What?" asked the girl. "What did he do?"

"A head spin. Never saw it done prettier. Egad, girl, the fellow is a master!" The old man slid up to sit on the edge of his seat.

Then Ted Fisher did a foolish thing; he lost his temper. Evidently he thought the stranger had worked the trick to make sport of him before the crowd. And the applause stung. Without a word he lowered his head and charged. A faint smile flickered below the unknown teacher's mask; then his body bent like a flash as Fisher closed in. One long sinewy arm whipped around Fisher's waist and lifted him from the mat. Few of those present saw the rapid movements of the masked one's hands then, but in less than twenty seconds they saw the chesty Fisher caught in the same hold he had tried to use—and the masked man did not fail.

With Fisher properly subdued there followed twenty minutes of dizzy action on the mat during which he was drilled on staying behind his man when on the offensive, how to apply the torturing toe hold, the crushing body scissors, the complicated but effective jackknife, and that most dreaded of all wrestling holds, the deadly head lock.

Sam Payne forgot his age, his dignity, and decorum, forgot everyting; tossed off thirty years and was a boy again. He yelled, shouted, and cheered with all his might, and, when the session ended, grasped his daughter's hand and dashed down to the main floor.

"I want to meet that fellow," he told Doris. "I want to make him promise to come out to Denver and show the boys there a real wrestler." And the girl was not loath to go. There was something intensely fascinating about that mask.

However, they were too late; the stranger was gone.

"Had to hurry away," the coach explained. "Due back in Yorktown at eleven thirty. Wrestles Hassan the Turk at the Majestic to-night."

"Um-m!" grunted Sam Payne. That same night, after he had taken Doris to her dormitory, he taxied forty miles to Yorktown and watched the unknown gain two falls over the two-hundred-and-fifty-pounds Turk in a Herculean struggle that lasted two hours and forty minutes.

CHAPTER III.

ARMED AGAINST DANGER.

DURING the first of the two weeks preceding the meeting with Lambert Tech, Dan Lorrie haunted the fountain in the campus. And nearly every evening he saw Doris walking with her father and Ted Fisher. And then on Saturday night, under a starlit sky, he saw her with Fisher alone.

The two were walking close, and in her face uptilted to the student's, Lorrie saw the shy, happy smile he had dared to hope would some time be for him. As they passed, he saw her hand held fast in Fisher's. A scrap of conversation drifted to his ears.

"You bet I'm going to win, Doris," Fisher was saying. "That masked guy is a bear of a teacher. Don't you tell a soul, but he's spent most of his time with me, and the trick is to send me in to win the heavyweight contest, too!"

"That's the spirit, Ted! The old Kenton spirit! It takes courage to go out of your class. I'm proud of you!" Doris' soft voice was full of admiration.

Lorrie waited to hear no more—he fled. And during the next week no one saw him on the campus at any time.

Friday afternoon arrived, and with it came nearly the whole undergraduate body of Lambert Tech bent on finishing the job of crushing their ancient rival. Not in years had such interest been aroused over the wrestling contests, and in short order it became apparent that the Kenton gym would not begin to hold the throng clamoring to see the match. A hurried consultation resulted, and the Kenton Theater, the

town's largest playhouse, was at last secured through the courtesy of The Mammoth Indoor Circus, which was playing a week's engagement at the place.

At four o'clock Doris and her father were in the girl's room when the telephone bell rang.

"Hello!" called Doris.

"Hello!" came back over the wire. "Is that you, Doris?" A little flush came into her face only to drain away as her eyes hardened. "Yes," she replied.

"This is Dan—Dan Lorrie. You know, changing the match to the theater to-night has upset everything, and I thought maybe you didn't have good seats. The boxes are reserved for the undergraduates of the two schools, and I've got tickets for the left lower. I'm going, Doris, and please won't you and your father go with me? I understand that The Masked Marvel and another professional from Yorktown are going to give an exhibition before the contests start, and——"

"Thanks, Mr. Lorrie," the girl replied coldly; "but Mr. Fisher has already supplied us with seats in the right lower box, and I like the right side much better, and then, too, since Ted is doing the work you might have done in the match to-night, I think it only fair to reward his courage by giving him your other place also! Glad you have enough interest to go, though; maybe you can at least cheer for old Kenton. Good-by." Her receiver was on the hook too soon for her to catch his reply.

Old Sam Payne grinned at the evident wrath in the heart of his little girl. When she looked and acted that way she reminded him strongly of the mystic long-ago, when her mother was like Doris was to-day. The old man loved spirit, dash, and courage; evidently his daughter had plenty of it.

"What's this? What's this?" he asked. "Somebody peeved you, Doris?"

"Yes," she told him—"that impossible Dan Lorrie."

"What's he done?"

"It's what he hasn't done that matters." The girl bit her lip as her color rose.

The lip biting was not lost on Payne; nor were the flaming cheeks without quick meaning. A sudden pang of fear, the stab of sharp alarm, shot through him. Doris was a sensible girl, and he knew that bitterness in her voice came from no trivial cause.

Deep concern for her swelled in him, and he rose quickly, to walk over beside her as she stood looking out of the window. "What's the matter, Doris? Tell your old dad about it." His arm slipped around her shoulders.

For a moment she stood resolute and then quickly hid her face on his arm. There was almost a sob in her muffled voice. "Oh, he's a coward, daddy, an insufferable coward!"

Instantly the old man knew; but for the moment sorrow and sympathy for her shut his lips. Staring through the window at distant wooded hills, his vision grew misty as with one hand he stroked her bright head. Presently, however, he mastered his emotion. "Never mind, little girl," he said softly, "you're fooling yourself. You're a genuine true-blue Payne, and no one of them could ever care very much for a coward. You'll forget him fast enough when you get back home. There's a lot of real fellows out there, and I suspect a number of 'em are just waiting for you. Come now—let's smile! No coward is worth a tear."

It was a little hard to do, but at last she smiled. Letting her hands slide down his broad chest, and into his coat pockets, she leaned back on her heels and smiled up at him through the blur in her eyes. Then, as quickly as it had been born, the smile faded into a look of startled concern. Slowly her left hand came out of his

pocket; clutched in her fingers was an ugly-looking automatic pistol.

"Daddy!" her tone was sharp. "Why are you carrying that?"

"Here, here, give me that thing!" he said quickly as he took the gun from her and slipped it into his hip pocket. Then he laughed a bit awkwardly and his face reflected deep chagrin over his having let her find the weapon. "You shouldn't be poking around in people's pockets, young lady!" he chided gently.

"Daddy, you're in danger! I know it. You haven't carried a gun in years. Tell me, what is it?"

"Oh, nothing," he scoffed; "but if it'll make you any easier, I can explain that we've had a bit of trouble in the mines and one silly fellow has done considerable threatening. It's rather foolish; but the company and your mother insist that I carry the weapon, for which I have a permit even here. You know your mother—I suppose I'd carry a cannon around with me if she insisted on it."

They laughed at that, and presently unpleasant things were forgotten in eager speculation over the coming meet with Lambert Tech.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE WINGS.

THE theater was filled to overflowing with a crowd whose unleashed spirit resounded in cheers, songs, and band music. Half the house was Kenton's, the other half Lambert's. They took turns in trying to outdo each other in the matter of noise.

However, there was one group in the building that had no respect for either, and that was the circus animals caged up back stage. Unused to such bedlam, the jungle beasts grew excited, too, and mixed with the cheers were roars of lions, hoarse coughing grunts of jaguars, snarls of leopards and tigers, while at intervals the very rafters shook with

a demoniacal cry more terrible than all in its fierceness.

"What is it?" Doris, shuddering, asked of her father.

"Darned if I know," he replied. "Glad it's caged up, whatever it is."

Then the beasts were forgotten. From the wings came the famous Masked Marvel and another man fully as big to strip off their robes and jump onto the mat. They lost no time. They were not there to wrestle for a fall; merely to entertain. And that they did.

For fifteen minutes the crowd was in an uproar as the two professionals ripped through half a hundred complicated holds, pulled off "flying mares," head spins, and feats of giant strength. To finish, the masked man clamped a head lock on his opponent and bore him gracefully to the mat. Then they disappeared.

The blare of applause that followed them was but a prelude to the roar that went up when the collegiate contests got under way. Very early in the first match the teaching of the stranger became apparent. In less than fifteen minutes little Tommy Bogart had pinned his adversary's shoulders down and first honors went to old Kenton. The lightweights followed, and though Dunton put up a fast, game fight his opponent caught him with a hammer lock and threw him in twenty-eight minutes. It was Lambert's turn to raise the rafters. Points were even.

Following this match came the wel- ters, and Bemis had hoped to win that; but Boley, of Lambert, was too fast, strong, and tricky. After thirty-five minutes of heroic struggle in which he had wriggled out of a whole series of punishing holds, "Faithful Jim" Wickens went down under a neck-breaking full nelson. Lambert rattled the roof boards again.

In their box old Sam Payne writhed in his seat. He shouted, roared out encouragement and advice in a great

voice, called on the Kenton men to fight for the old college, and stood up to lead the cheering. Doris shot a glance to the left lower box. The tinge of disappointment she had first felt now gave way to rising anger. Dan Lorrie had not come. The seat that all through the match had been vacant now held The Masked Man, who sat immobile with his old robe wrapped about him.

A twinge of self-reproach disturbed her. Maybe, she thought, her sharp tongue had spoiled the night for Lorrie, and he would not come. Still troubled, she turned to watch the middleweight match just started.

Holcomb, of Lambert, was strong and fast; but in Ted Fisher he met a born wrestler, a man with the strength of a heavyweight, dazzling speed, and one wholly merciless once a punishing hold was secured. A sudden flurry of action put the house in an uproar; but in less than two minutes Holcomb was on the defensive and Fisher began the rapid application of one grilling, torturing hold after another.

Fisher gave his man no rest, and in eleven minutes Holcomb, caught in a rib-crushing body scissors, gasping for breath, let his shoulders slip to the mat. Doris stood up with her father and cheered. For three minutes the demonstration lasted, and then as the last rousing cheer echoed through the dome of the building, there came again from somewhere back stage that wild, terrifying roar of a mad, caged beast.

"We're getting help from back there," Sam Payne grinningly remarked to his daughter, though even he shivered at the ferocity in the wild cry.

"I—I don't like it," confessed Doris. "I wish the beast would keep still."

It didn't keep still, however. Instead, the fury of its blood-curdling screams increased until the note of nervousness was lost in one of bestial rage.

"That brute is sure enough mad," Payne said.

"The cry is horrible." Doris shivered. Then they forgot the roaring beast as the mat was arranged for the final bout of the match.

Hollis Dunn, towering over six feet and weighing more than two hundred and ten pounds, walked out confidently from the wings, and Lambert rose en masse to cheer. Dunn was a giant, bull-necked and with heavy muscles bulging out. He had not been thrown in three years, though Porky Flynn had come near doing it the previous year.

Dunn was known as a "dirty" wrestler. If it was possible to hurt an opponent contrary to the rules and not get caught, he did it; and once he got his ponderous arms and legs wrapped around a victim in a legitimate hold he knew no mercy. In him Lambert saw victory won. Exultation, triumph, rang in the college yells that went crashing to the high dome.

Doris Payne sized the big fellow up, and her hopes fell. In that moment Ted Fisher walked out from the right wings and tossed off his robe. Lambert looked on amazed, unbelieving; but instantly Kenton arose and ripped loose a yell that shook the windows, and Lambert men, suddenly sensing the glorious courage of the little fellow, for all their desire to win, rose and joined in the cheering. Nearly all of the spectators knew of Flynn's broken arm, and they gloried in the pluck of Fisher, the lad who dared tackle a man outweighing him by fifty pounds, and that man the terrible Dunn.

Doris felt like crying; but when Fisher singled her out she waved encouragement to him. Her father waved, too, but his face looked worried. And then, as his eyes swept across stage, he started sharply. He had not seen the masked man enter the opposite box.

"Look, Doris!" Payne exclaimed breathlessly. "There's the masked instructor over there in that box!"

"And see, daddy! He's smiling—be-

low his mask! He's smiling at Ted. Oh, do you suppose Ted really has a ch—” She cut off the sentence as Fisher and Dunn jumped onto the mat and the great match began.

CHAPTER V.

THE TOE HOLD.

THE match between Ted Fisher and Dunn was written large in the annals of old Kenton; a match that Kenton men and women present tucked away in memory to recall gloriously when other generations should tread the campus grounds of the loved old college. Never had the shouting spectators seen such incredible speed as Fisher displayed.

Frantically the giant Dunn grabbed and clutched for him, but Fisher was seldom there. Under his opponent's arms, between his legs, leaping over his back, slipping, twisting, head spinning out of holds, Fisher had the big fellow dizzy trying to follow him. Then came the fatal moment when Dunn straightened up off guard; a flash, a streak, and Fisher's right arm circled the giant's ankles. After one Herculean tug down came Dunn to the mat.

Only two men—The Masked Marvel in the left lower box and Sam Payne in the right—knew what happened then. Only they knew what quickness and strength were required to recover balance and clamp the leg-breaking toe hold on Dunn before he got control of those mighty muscles; but little Ted Fisher came through.

The crowd gasped and held its breath. It was unbelievable! There was Fisher, teeth set, eyes blazing, his lithe muscles standing out like whipcords and knotted ropes, slowly forcing his victim's foot backward with that leverage which would almost certainly mean victory.

The moment was so full of drama, so tense and charged, that not a voice was raised. Slowly the foot went back and

the crowd saw a look of fear cross Dunn's face. Fisher saw it, too, and increased the pressure. Vainly the big man struggled; the little fellow hung to him until "Big" Dunn, the man who hadn't lost a fall in three years, rolled over on his back.

Pandemonium let loose then. Kenton cheered, screamed, stamped. Victory! Glorious victory! Victory all the sweeter because so unexpected! Two men rushed out and helped Dunn from the stage to a dressing room. Ted Fisher was already in his.

Doris was alternately laughing and crying when her father leaped to the stage to lead a cheer; but the cheer never rose. From back stage came suddenly a fiendish roar that might have been voiced by some inhuman devil. So hellish was it that a frightened hush crowded down over the house; a moment of silence, and then came another blood-curdling roar—from a different location this time.

At least one person somewhere in the hall sensed what the change of location meant. His cry sounded to every ear. "My God, the thing is loose!"

Whimpering cries of terror from the women followed that, and the men saw queer, ghastly expressions appear on one another's faces.

There came one more bellowing roar and then shrieks of horror as the monster sprang from behind the scenery back stage to stand swaying and glaring at the frightened crowd in front.

CHAPTER VI.

OVER THE FOOTLIGHTS.

THERE he stood, a three-hundred-pound gorilla. Infuriated by the unusual din, he had raged at his door until the rusty rivets in the hasp had given way, setting him free. His little eyes were red with wrath and hatred; his enormous jaws worked spasmodically.

Doris Payne screamed and dropped, half fainting, back into her chair. Her father turned to look at the mad brute and stood dumb, as if he were rooted to the stage. It seemed just then that the attack of the furious gorilla would fail on him.

A shriek rose from hundreds of throats as the whole crowd stirred in the beginning of a rush for the exits. That meant, panic, stampede, a horror too terrible to think of—and one man knew it.

Before the rush started, his ringing cry steadied them momentarily, and they turned to see the masked wonder standing just behind the footlights. "Keep your heads!" he shouted. "Walk out slowly. Go slow or you'll kill half the people in here! Go slow, I tell you! I'll take care of this beast. Get off the stage!" he said to Sam Payne. "Don't hurry—just walk off. There's a dressing room twenty feet back. Get in it, and lock the door."

There was no time, however, for Payne to reach the dressing room. Opening his slavering jaws, the brute let out another marrow-chilling roar and charged straight at Payne. And then that crowd saw courage; sheer, naked courage; a streak of white flesh and black tights, and, six feet from where the "old grad" stood, the masked giant's shoulders, with all his flying weight behind it, crashed into the gorilla's shaggy side.

Down they went, rolling over and over. In a flash both were up, and roaring, the mad beast turned on the man who had upset him. A great cry went up calling for the keepers, but none came. The one who had been left in charge had barricaded himself behind a dressing-room door.

The throng, too fascinated now to move, grew sick when they saw the masked man caught in the sweep of those long, terrible arms and crushed to the body of the brute. However,

before that bone-snapping strength could be exerted to the full or ever the wicked jaws could shut on the white flesh of the wrestler, the horror-stricken spectators saw something else. They saw old Sam Payne suddenly find himself and come alive.

Payne's hand flashed to his hip and came out in the wink of an eye; a streak of flame, a deafening roar, a spot of crimson from the mad beast's head and the gorilla dropped in a hairy, kicking heap to the floor. There followed a moment of dead silence, a choked, suffocating silence, and then came a wild, tumultuous cheer as the masked man rolled free and got, gasping, to his feet.

Calmly Sam Payne shoved the gun back into his pocket and turned to the wrestler. "Thanks," Payne said, reaching out a hand; "you saved my life. That brute surprised me so greatly that I forgot all about my gun!"

"I want to thank you, too, sir," said another voice, tearful and shaken. "You are the bravest man in the world!" Doris had climbed over the footlights to reach her father's side.

"It—it's nothing." The masked man smiled. Then an expression born of stabbing pain crossed his face. "My—my sides!" he gasped and swayed in a faint.

Payne caught him and laid him down. "Send for an ambulance!" the graduate shouted. "This man's ribs are crushed!" Then he exclaimed: "What the devil, Doris!"

The girl was on her knees beside the unconscious man; her fingers had torn the mask from his face; there was a wailing, grief-stricken note in her voice. "Dan! Dan Lorrie! Why, oh, why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you?"

Again the moon wove shadowy patterns on the soft grass beside the fountain in the campus grounds and again the shimmering gold flashes of fish play-

ing through patches of wet moonlight went unheeded by the two young people who sat on a bench near by.

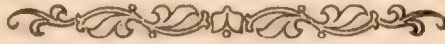
"And I—I called you a coward! Oh, Dan, why didn't you tell me?"

"Two reasons, Doris," Lorrie explained gravely. "One was that I was under contract not to reveal my identity, and"—he grinned ruefully—"the surest way of keeping a secret is to keep it. The other reason is my kid brother, Bill. I've sort of looked after Bill ever since he was a little fellow, and I want him to come to Kenton, too. I want him on about every team, if he can do so well, and I think he can.

"However," Lorrie went on, "you can't do that and work your way through, so somebody had to make the

money. Wrestling was the only way I knew of, and I've done pretty well. Bill will be along next year. But it would break his heart if he thought I'd given up my chance for him. That's why I asked to have my part in that affair at the theater covered up. Bill will make records enough for the Lorrie family."

Singing deep in the man's voice there sounded a pensive note. Perhaps it was the exquisite symphony of sacrifice; but to the heart of the girl it sounded like faint echoes of regret that could not quite be blotted out, and as she bent her head something warm and wet fell upon his hand. "Maybe so; but they'll never equal the record Dan Lorrie made," she said softly.



ALONG THE ROAD

By Ronald Barrett Kirk

HOW many years ago it seems
 We wandered forth together
 Along the trail of summertime
 Through golden summer weather!
 The gypsy trail—the gypsy trail—
 We cared not where its ending;
 Only a long road for our feet,
 Adventure round its bending.
 Our youth was very dear to us,
 Our hearts were high with dreaming,
 So long ago—yet even now
 I see the sunlight gleaming
 The way it gleamed that summertime,
 When we were comrades, going
 Along the road that led to lands
 We had no dream of knowing.

Ah, golden youth adventuring
 With restless feet a-quake,
 What cared ye that the way was long
 That led by road or river?
 What knew ye of the weary years
 We wander now forever?



The Road to Madagascar

By
Paul Deresco Augsburg



(A NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

THE GREAT REBELLION.

SUDDENLY the notion took Harper, and he made for that stack of plates resting on the counter. Seizing the one on top, he gripped it like a discus. However, one should meet Harper first, that one may more intelligently understand the strange thing Harper was about to do. One should know where Harper was, where Harper had kept himself for the last three decades, where Harper's thoughts had just been straying. In short, one should have Harper's background in a series of swift, succinct sentences.

His age was fifty-one. In Lawrence City, which has a population of 95,000 and 125,000—depending upon who tells it, the uninspired census man or the chamber of commerce—Harper owned one of the leading shoe stores. He had beheld in the stocking most of Lawrence City's leading feet. Once, when Senator Millsbaugh, carrying the administration's fight direct to the people, came there to make a speech, Harper fitted the great statesman to a pair of oxfords. Harper remembered that foot well—size 11-b, with a fair-sized bunion just behind the senator's second toe. So

one will perceive that Harper's life had not been altogether devoid of its moments.

However, there comes a time, somewhere along the middle years of a prosperous, prosaic existence, that a great rebellion seizes the masculine soul. It is the time of acute humdrumitis, when one abruptly finds himself face to face with the question: "Isn't life passing me by?" Then, in diverse ways, the reaction sets in.

The reaction was about to set in with Harper. On a business errand in a part of the city quite removed from his store, he had entered the Acropolis restaurant to bolt a belated luncheon. The Acropolis—Joe Dardanapolis, proprietor—was new, and Harper was not known in it. The courthouse clock had just chimed two; by the time he could reach his customary lurching place they would be about to mop the floor. So Harper plunked down on an Acropolis chair and glowered at the menu.

"Nice ros'bif to-day," suggested Mr. Dardanapolis.

That settled it. Harper ordered oysters, fried.

"And coffee," he added. Then, without any perceptible warning, a mighty tidal wave of resentment swept over Harper. He found himself drowning in it, and,

like any proper drowning man, he saw his life reviewed in all its flat monotony.

The "And coffee" seemed to be responsible; realization came to him that he had been saying "And coffee" now for almost thirty years. The phrase seemed to epitomize this weary, dull, insipid life he was leading—shave, breakfast with coffee, feet, shoe drummers, feet, more feet; luncheon with coffee, after-luncheon cigar, feet, feet, and feet; dinner with coffee, after-dinner cigar, movie, magazine, or game of bridge; every two weeks a haircut; every seven days a Kiwanis luncheon; once a year a business trip to New York.

It was all so different from the life Harper had envisioned when he stood on the verge of his twenties. Then his was to be a career of nomadic adventure. He would ship aboard some craft at 'Frisco—name of glamorous magic, 'Frisco!—and sail through the Golden Gate to the far corners of the world. Java, Shanghai, Singapore, Madagascar—Harper had a fine sense of euphony, and his tentative itinerary included only bold, rollicking names with the tang of spice and the sea's own smell of salt.

However, think what a sorry day it would be for our chambers of commerce and our uninspired census men if all the young bloods who planned a life of nomadic adventure should actually go through with it! Why, Fufuti might conceivably become so cluttered with beach combers that the local concessionaires would construct a board walk and recreation pier. And Shanghai—hapless municipality!—would be obliged to set apart a certain area to be known and sniffed at and sightseen as Chinatown.

Harper owed the abandonment of his particular plans to a girl named Myrtle. Somehow Singapore had become very indistinct in the light of Myrtle's eyes, and the more he contemplated Myrtle's lips the less he could see of Java. At last even the island of Madagascar was swallowed by the sea—and the sea, it

is scarcely necessary to state, was the treacherous one of matrimony. There was a whirlwind courtship, Myrtle broke her engagement to Bernie Rand, they eloped—and gradually Harper had acquired his shoe business in Green Street.

It was a thriving business now. It enabled Harper to pay with ease the one hundred dollars which a benevolent judge, taking due cognizance of Myrtle's private resources, had decreed that Harper should give her once a month. There had been no divorce; merely a legal separation. Myrtle had grown tired of him—that was all. The sight of him made her sick, as she gracefully expressed it. It was more than any civilized woman should be expected to bear—seeing Harper every day, two meals and evenings. That had been her claim, and Harper had not felt impelled to offer much opposition; no more opposition, indeed, than was necessary to make her unalterably determined in her intention.

Well, he had been free now for almost a year; but the freedom came too late. Just consider the cruel irony of Harper's lot. Myrtle had lured him from that carefree career of adventure, had chained him to a hearthstone and the prosaic humdrum of his shoe store—and then, when she had reduced him to an utterly tiresome, commonplace, money-making business man, she had belittled him before his friends, humiliated him in public, and at last cast him off as too monotonous for words.

Harper considered all this now, as he sat in the Acropolis restaurant and waited for his oysters. He saw clearly for the first time how life had changed him. The pent-up resentment of the years was upon him. Even the cheap new mural decorations, depicting the Parthenon and some wood nymphs and the lateen-sailed fish boats agleam on the placid Ægean—even these horrible paintings mocked him. Were they not

part of the distant places his adventurous years would have known?

Near a corner, above the pie cabinet, stood a small plaster casting of Discobolus, poised with the discus he had been about to throw through all those centuries since the glory that was Greece. In that lithe figure, doomed forever to bend in an uncompleted action, Harper might have seen a symbol of his own frustrated life; but he was too upset to notice symbols. Chemical transitions were going on within him.

The platter of oysters appeared, and the coffee. The oysters were crisp, cooked through in a way Harper hated. Some of the coffee had slopped into the saucer.

"Nice apple pie to-day," remarked Mr. Dardanapolis, hovering at his elbow.

It was at this precise instant that the notion took Harper, and he made for the stack of plates resting on the counter. There is a certain vague, emotional chemistry which leads up to such unorthodox actions; but the stolid Anglo-Saxon is almost invariably immune. In the Malay states, where things of this sort are somewhat common, they call it running amuck. Harper, in his own harmless way, was having his fling at the amuck game.

He seized the topmost plate, gripped its edge with his right hand, and swung back his arm until he stood poised like Discobolus.

"See that little window!" he cried, facing the two-foot aperture through which the orders are passed from the kitchen.

He bowled away. Down the length of the restaurant shot the plate and crashed against the wall, six inches wide of the window.

"Watch this one!" he invited, grabbing another plate. "A regular discus would be better balanced, but—Shucks!"

The third time Harper was more

methodical, despite the distracting clamor raised by Mr. Dardanapolis. The plate passed fairly through the window and shattered itself upon the kitchen range.

"There!" exclaimed Harper. "That's more like it!"

The chef's anguished curses, phrased in an alien's tongue, came back to him like an echo. A door banged—Mr. Dardanapolis leaving in search of assistance. Harper improved the opportunity by sending another plate winging through the window. One lone diner—a husky expressman—applauded between mouthfuls of pie.

Harper's fifth plate missed by a foot. "Getting wild again," he commented.

"Better beat it," suggested the expressman. "Here comes a cop."

Harper spun around. The officer, exhorted with words and gestures by Mr. Dardanapolis, was just stretching his hand toward the door latch. In two more seconds he would be inside. In three more seconds his hand would rest on Harper's collar. In four more seconds—the Lord knew what would be happening in four more seconds.

Instinct came to Harper's aid. He dropped the sixth plate and ran to the rear. The terrified chef jumped aside as Harper burst through the door. One of the two dishwashers fainted. Through the alley exit fled Harper and on toward Green Street. Before the policeman could get outside once more, his quarry had been lost in the busy traffic of Lawrence City's principal thoroughfare.

CHAPTER II.

THE OPEN ROAD.

BEFORE long, Harper paused at the curb and chuckled. His momentary madness had left him, for no white mar is properly geared to run genuinely amuck. That is a chemistry which reacts *in toto* only upon brown pigments

or black. A Malay would not have stopped until he had killed three men and been himself slain in the bargain; but Harper was contented with the destruction of half a dozen almost worthless plates.

An unwonted exhilaration filled him. Far from being ashamed of himself, he felt the mischievous exultation of a boy who has just slipped a beetle into his sister's bed. Harper's eyes were bright and eager beneath the permanent wrinkles of his brow. He whistled a lively tune.

As Harper was crossing the street, however, his whistling abruptly ceased. He had spied a woman that looked like Myrtle; she was passing his bank—a combination of circumstances with a resultant logical thought. Speaking in a low voice to himself, Harper entered the bank.

A thrift sign caught his eyes, admonishing the public to take care of their pennies, promising that the dollars would then take care of themselves.

"Good advice!" agreed Harper, writing a check.

The teller smiled at him when he presented it. They had been facing each other like this for years—two men in a pair of ruts. If Harper wore a new necktie, the teller was sure to pass a sprightly comment. If an unusually bold holdup happened in Lawrence City, Harper, as chairman of the Kiwanis Club's committee on crime prevention, was certain to be twitted about it by the teller.

This day—the last of the baseball season—the teller was specializing in the national game. "Well, they've got Walter Johnson on the mound," he began. "I got a small bet up on the old boy. He's been winning games so long that it seems like he don't know nothing else. Like you and shoes, eh? How'll you have this hundred? Tens and twenties?"

"Pennies," replied Harper.

The teller laughed. He appreciated a good joke as well as any one. Pennies indeed! A droll fellow, Harper, to those who really knew him!

"No kidding; I mean it," the droll one persisted.

"What—pennies?"

"Sure."

"One hundred dollars in pennies! Why, man, that's ten thousand!"

"Yes. I guess I'll have to have a sack."

"You really want this in pennies?" asked the teller, still incredulous.

Harper nodded. He was a good customer, and of course he had his way. There were not ten thousand coppers in the place; but the cashier himself crossed over to the First National and filled the balance. The sack which Harper carried away weighed more than fifty pounds.

"I think Walter will lose to-day," he called over his shoulder to the teller. "A man can't keep doing the same old thing forever. Gets too tiresome."

"Yeh. Well, it wouldn't be tiresome to win that bet."

"A man can't keep doing the same old thing forever," repeated Harper doggedly.

He summoned a taxi and was driven to Myrtle's address. A bridge party seemed to be in progress. The door to the apartment had been left ajar by Mrs. Montopp, who lived across the hall and had to rush "home" at intervals to observe her infant's slumber. Harper heard feminine sounds of bidding and unethical gossip across the boards. He sniffed the odor of cigarettes.

"Blah!" exclaimed Harper in deep disgust.

Then he pushed open the door and strode into the living room. "Good afternoon, ladies! How do you do, Mrs. Harper?"

He watched, fascinated, while his wife withdrew her cigarette holder and leisurely exhaled. It was something he

was never quite able to reconcile—this fat, sneering, cigarette-smoking, present-day Myrtle and the slender, affectionate young woman who single-handed had banished Shanghai, Madagascar, Singapore, and Java. Harper's lips tightened. And so it was for *her* he had thrown away the open road and had painfully acquired a shoe store! The chemical components of amuck were again on the verge of mingling.

"Are you winning, my dear?" asked Harper.

"No. If you must know, I've had damnably wretched hands."

"Then maybe it's good I came. This'll bolster the bank."

"What will?"

Without replying, Harper jerked open the sack and turned it bottom side up. Ten thousand pennies debouched upon the carpet with a jingle that was pretty, indeed, to hear. Some of the more playful coppers chased each other among the feet of the lady guests. One sped straight for the radiator and butted Lincoln's head against a cast-iron leg.

"Henry, what do you mean?" cried Myrtle.

"Alimony, my dear. It's the first of the month."

"But——"

"If you'll just count it and give me a receipt."

A titter flitted among the lady guests. Myrtle's face grew stern and unpleasantly purple. This had been one of her husband's secret grievances—that Myrtle would never cry nor be softly feminine, as a woman should on occasion. If ever one ought to burst into tears, he reflected, it was now.

"I'll do no such a thing!" she snapped instead. "You've never paid me like this before."

"That's it exactly. A man can't keep doing the same old thing forever." Then Harper thought of Madagascar, and he added viciously: "If there was any justice, you'd be paying me."

"You get out of here!" Myrtle ordered. "And take this stuff with you!" She gave the pennies a savage kick.

"Then you won't sign a receipt?"

"I won't!"

"That's all right with me, my dear," said Harper, smiling at the lady guests. "I've paid you, and there are plenty of witnesses to prove it."

He halted at the threshold and looked back. "I hope you all win. I hope you all hold four aces. And remember this, Mrs. Harper: Take care of the pennies, and the dollars will take care of themselves!"

CHAPTER III.

THE WAITING WORLD.

THERE was no doubt that Harper felt absurdly happy. Never in his life had he achieved the last triumphant words over Myrtle, never vanquished her in public; but now, he told himself, all past humiliations had been avenged—even that time, at the Keppelharts' dinner for their New York cousin, when she ended a tirade of abuse by declaring that the greatest blunder of her life was jilting Bernie Rand and eloping with the miserable worm whom Lawrence City knew as Henry Harper.

In pleasant retrospect he heard again the jingle of those pennies as they descended onto the carpet. Fondly he repeated all his speeches, especially that one about Myrtle paying him. Each word was honey in his mouth, each syllable ambrosia. Harper smacked his lips and went over some of the words again:

"'If there was any justice, you'd be paying me.' Lord, but that's good! 'If there was any justice.' And the look on her face when she heard it! Say, I'd give five dollars to see Matt Donaldson when his wife tells him to-night. Man, it'll be all over town!"

Three blocks down the street Harper saw a group of boys playing ball in a vacant lot. He paused to watch them.

A red-headed young slugger hit a long fly, and, in a flash, the ball was descending not far from Harper. Much to his surprise, he caught it.

"Come on, mister; you can be on our side!" came the prompt invitation.

Forthwith Harper found himself playing first base, and gradually he became aware of a deep contentment. He rubbed dirt onto his hands and crouched with palms resting alertly on either thigh. When, on his first time up, he hit a grounder and scuttled down to first, somebody yelled "Slide!" and he slid. It was a thing of beauty. Even the opposition voiced admiration of Harper's slide, which got him to first base just in time. Flushed with success, he stole second, and, though the catcher had muffed the pitch, slid again.

After a time there was a summons, in a feminine voice for one of his teammates. It came coursing through the air in a shrill, drawn-out "Ji-i-immme-e-e-ee!" Jimmie responded in a tone at once plaintive, resigned, disgusted, and futilely defiant. Harper sensed his helpless martyrdom and found himself, like the others, uttering words of commiseration and protest.

Then a feeling of exultation gripped him. He was free; there was no one to tyrannize over him. Why, he could play ball here till dark, if he wanted to. He might do as he pleased. Nobody could shout "Har-r-r-per!" into the air and compel his reluctant feet.

It was a momentous discovery—one rich in its possibilities. For so many years had Harper been a slave to shoes and Myrtle that his servitude had become a matter of habit. Yet Myrtle had left him, free to do anything except marry—and no wise worm adorns the same hook twice. As for the shoes, why shouldn't his business walk along without him? Blodgett and Winterbothom could handle all the feet that would ever present themselves for shoeing at Harper's store.

This strange new trend of thought rapidly took possession of his mind. His hour of emancipation had arrived. He was ready for the proclamation when presently it came, as shrill and drawn-out as the call of Jimmie's mother. Yes; it was just as shrill and drawn-out, but infinitely sweeter—the wail of a freight locomotive signaling for a switch!

Harper had just hit a double and was perched on second base when he heard that invitation. The sun was slanting low; factory sirens had already screamed the knell of work; Lawrence City was preparing for dinner and the tiresome relaxations of its evening. 'Come awa-a-a-ay from it a-a-a-all!' called the whistle, just as it had called to Harper when, as a boy, he was delivering Evening *Tribunes* along his news route. "The world is waiting; come awa-a-a-ay, far awa-a-a-ay!" called the whistle, and the sound of it entered Harper's ears and went thrilling down his spine. Westward over the mountains lay 'Frisco and the open sea—Java and Shanghai—Singapore—Madagascar! And still the whistle wailed.

Then Harper became aware of a mad shouting. The boy they called Tom was rounding first base, screaming at him to run. His teammates were clamorously making the same demand from the side lines. Harper got under way, crossed third, headed home, slid, picked himself up, and discovered the diminutive left fielder of the opposition preparing for a tremendous heave which, the gods being favorable, would land the ball somewhere near the short stop.

"Home run, Tom!" exhorted the frenzied team—and when Tom crossed the plate the score stood forty-seven to thirty-five!

Harper picked up his coat. "Gotta be going, fellows. They've just been calling me."

"Aw! I didn't hear anybody call."

"They did, though." Harper grinned. "I might get a licking if I don't hurry."
"Aw!"

CHAPTER IV.

FACE TO FACE WITH ADVENTURE.

THE railroad tracks lay eastward half a mile. As he approached them, Harper began to wonder how one goes about boarding a freight when it's in motion. Practical misgivings beset him; and then he passed a policeman.

"Looked at me kind of funny," Harper said to himself. "Maybe—maybe a general order's out to arrest me! Maybe the Greek gave 'em my description. Gosh, I'd better get out of town fast!"

There came a faint shuffling noise, rapidly staccato, then the urgent warning of a whistle. It must be a passenger train, Harper thought; too speedy for a freight. The sound of it quickened Harper's pulse and gave his nascent wanderlust the spur.

Soon he could see the outlines of box cars standing motionless on a siding. Far ahead crouched the locomotive, taking deep breaths like a runner resting. Harper understood—the freight which had called him back to the world of his youth was waiting for the passenger train to pass. He would be just in time.

Close at hand were several flat cars and three or four gondolas. Harper had decided to climb aboard one of the gondolas, but the open door of a box car caught his eye. In his boyhood he had always pictured himself riding thus, with a roof overhead and the country gliding by in the frame of an open door. In those long-ago days he had dreamed of corn-silk cigarettes; of lying prone, lulled by the solacing click of the rails, as he blew sweet clouds of smoke out through the box-car door.

Harper cast a nervous look up and down the track and swung aboard. There was a reverberant roar as the passenger train shot past; then there

came a series of abrupt jerks which almost threw Harper off his feet. It was as if the freight had been waiting expressly to take him. Its passenger aboard, the train was on its way.

Harper sat down and tried to believe it was true. Hidden within the dusk of that creaking box car, he looked out in an ecstatic daze at the shifting twilight scene. The street lamps of Lawrence City flashed on and twinkled briefly as the freight, gathering momentum, crept steadily out of town. He saw housewives in their kitchens, men returning from their jobs, two boys delivering papers.

"Same old thing! Day after day, same old thing!" mumbled Harper, and he took a deep breath.

Then something warned him that he was not alone; a sound, perhaps, or just the psychic signal that another's presence gives one. Harper became suddenly tense. Slowly he turned his head, straining to pierce the shadows.

"Who's there?" he at last asked, a bit quiveringly.

A gruff voice answered: "Who're you?"

Harper crowded back toward the open door. He could dimly see the man now, huddled up forward against a crated casting. There was something menacing about that lurking figure. Instinct told him that the other man was armed; doubtless a tramp, thought Harper; and he framed his reply accordingly.

"Oh, I'm just a hobo."

"Yeh?" said the man, not at all convinced. "You sure about that?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I'm—I'm bumming to the coast."

"Yeh?"

The other was silent then, and the silence was oppressive to Harper; too ominous. What was the gruff stranger thinking? What was he going to do? Was he contemplating assault and robbery? Was he—

"Have a cigar?" asked Harper, unable to stand it longer.

A hand reached out and took the proffered perfecto. Harper smoked good cigars—much better than a tramp would be likely to have. The realization came to him too late, however.

"You light up first," ordered the stranger.

"Oh, certainly."

The match flashed to life and illuminated Harper's features. He could sense the other's close scrutiny in that interval of brightness.

The stranger laughed. "Hobo, are you?" There followed a groan and a soft, fierce curse. "My damned foot!"

"Foot hurt?" inquired Harper.

"Yeh. Got any booze?"

"No. Sorry."

"Junk?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Well, then, morphine. Junk's morphine."

"No; I haven't any—junk."

"Well, gimme your cigar. I'll get a light off it."

The stranger's manner had changed with that match flash of Harper's face. Such a harmless face, judged by his own rude standards! There was no need to fear a face like that, so utterly bereft of the brutal. The shoe store and Myrtle, the Kiwanis Club, and the chamber of commerce, had all left their own peculiar marks on Harper.

"I guess it's broken, all right," said the stranger presently. "A sniff of junk would help." Groaning heavily, he shifted his position. "I've gotta get to Springfield. There's a right doc there. What was that town—Lawrence City?"

"Yes; Lawrence City."

"Thought so. They put me in the boob there once."

"They were after me," said Harper, striving to speak casually. "The whole police force is looking for me."

"Yeh?" The stranger became eagerly interested. "What for?"

"Oh, I smashed up a restaurant!"

"The hell you did!" There followed a chuckle, ending in a groan. "What'd you— Shhh!"

Harper, too, held himself alert. A faint tramping of feet was sounding overhead, barely audible above the pounding song of the wheels and the straining box car's moans. The foot-falls ceased. There was the noise of some one scrambling over the edge.

"Beat it behind that crate—over there!" whispered the stranger. "They must've seen you get in."

Harper hid, wondering what it was all about. Crouching in the darkness, he waited and sought to still the nervous loudness of his breathing. Once the stranger groaned.

Then a beam of light flashed across the box car and a man swung in through the door. "You alone?" he growled, and the lantern sought the answer in a swift, darting excursion into all the corners. Harper, ducking his head, felt as though he had barely dodged a bullet.

"Well"—the newcomer was hulking menacingly over the injured man—"d'you know any reason why I shouldn't kick you off?"

"I'm clean!" pleaded the other. "Light as a stiff!"

"You'll be a stiff, too, if you land on your neck. Get up out of there! What you hiding?"

"Nothing."

The newcomer, quite evidently a railroad employee, expressed profane disbelief and repeated his order to rise.

"I can't. My foot's broke."

"Which foot?"

"Thisn."

"Thatn?" The trainman directed a savage kick at the injured member.

There was an answering shriek of pain, and then the unequal struggle started. The trainman had set down his lantern, so that its beams lighted up the center of the box car. He seized his victim by an arm, meaning to drag

him to the door and drop him out upon the right of way. Harper heard a grunted "No you don't!" as the injured man tried unsuccessfully to smash down the section of pipe which he had been concealing. Then there came frantic cries for help.

Harper responded. He threw himself at the trainman, taking him by surprise. It had been almost a generation since Harper last fought with his fists, but he did the best he could. His second blow struck squarely on the man's neck, throwing him against the side of the car. The trainman bellowed a curse which, in a saner moment, would have curdled Harper's blood. Then, snatching a blackjack from his pocket, the railroader rushed at the hapless shoe merchant.

However, the stranger with the broken foot was still to be reckoned with. As the trainman charged, Harper's companion swung sharply that section of pipe. It cracked upon the trainman's shin and he fell with an agonized roar. The stranger was a stickler for details. The pipe rapped once again, and the man lay still.

"Gosh!" gasped Harper.

"See if you can find a wire on one of them crates," ordered the stranger, quite matter-of-fact and calm.

Harper took up the lantern and looked. He found a rope strung through a collection of steel forgings, and together they bound the unconscious trainman. Turbulent thoughts were racing through Harper's mind. He was scared and he was exultant; but the stranger's coolness soon reassured him, and the feeling of elation triumphed. A little song began to sing within his heart. He, Harper, was living at last! After all these years he had come face to face with adventure!

"I'd've had him in the first place if it wasn't for the damned foot!" grumbled the stranger. "He was wise about the pipe, too."

"He got me once," said Harper, withdrawing a hand from his face and finding it stained with crimson. Harper would not have traded that battle wound for a kingdom. Had it been possible to pluck the wound, place it in alcohol, and thus preserve it for all time, there is no doubt he would have done so.

"Yeh?" The stranger looked up and grinned with a sort of rude affection. "So he did! Well, I'll say you know your onions!"

Harper actually blushed.

"We'll have to lamb out of here," the stranger went on, suddenly businesslike. "Some of this baby's boy friends will be coming back to see what's keeping him."

"What'll we do?"

"She'll be stopping for water soon. You'll have to help me. This here foot's getting worse."

"Glad to," said Harper eagerly. "We'd better get you to a doctor."

The other's fierce change of expression startled him. "No, we don't! Gotta see a doc at Springfield, I tell you. You can't trust a strange doc."

"Why?" asked Harper in his innocence.

"Why!" The stranger hesitated, seeming to weigh Harper with his eyes. "Well, you just can't," he finished safely.

CHAPTER V.

LIFE'S FREE BREATH.

WHEN at last the freight train jerked to a halt somewhere out on the still, dark prairie, the two men fled to cover. Harper served as a crutch for the other, who groaned and cursed and clung to him and whispered terse directions. They could hear the busy rattle of gravel as the freight crew ran along the right of way looking for their comrade. Lamps flashed nervously over flat cars and gondolas, or focused for an inquiring instant on the seals of box-car doors. At last they found the bound, gagged figure; and the shouts of

the trainmen came clearly over to the fugitives crouched in a cornfield.

"Listen at 'em cuss!" chuckled the stranger. "It's lucky there ain't any moon."

"Y-yes," chattered Harper. "What'll they do now, do you think?"

"Oh, look around a little bit—until they get the signal. We're all right."

"Oh, sure. This is nothing," deprecated Harper. "Now, in Madagascar——" he might have added, but Harper's imagination was not of the agile sort.

The locomotive, lifting its snout from the water tank, snorted an impatient summons and returned, grunting, to its task. Like waves thundering slantwise against a concrete sea wall, a roar passed down the track as each freight car jerked up the slack. Then, slowly, the shadowy shapes followed each other into the night and away.

Harper's companion sank back on the rough ground and lay there, moaning. "It's getting worse," he gasped. "Say—brother—I'm clean right now. I most usually ain't. I'm usually pretty dirty."

"What?" asked Harper, instinctively knowing that the man must be speaking by metaphor.

"I'm usually dirty, I say. You know—*heavy*. Lots of dough."

"Oh! I get you."

"If"—the stranger's groans were becoming more frequent—"if you could just get me to Springfield. Plenty of dough there—see? Friends. Listen, d'you think you could steal a flivver?"

"Sure I could!" said Harper, talking in a daze. "I've stolen lots of 'em!"

"It's getting worse." The stranger sobbed. "Say, brother—hurry, will you? And if you can get some junk you——"

"Sure, I'll get some," promised Harper.

He returned to the dirt road paralleling the tracks. This country was like

his own back yard to Harper. Many a Sunday had he driven past that field on his way to Lockwood. Lockwood could not be much more than two miles north—three at the most. He was well acquainted with the garage man at Lockwood.

Soon a farmer drove along, and Harper got a "lift." Within ten minutes he had reached the village and was telling a fanciful story, of which he began to feel proud. Prominent in the plot thereof was a very active, very unexpected, very malicious toothache. If the garage man could only induce the village druggist to sell Harper a bit of morphine, all would be well.

The success of this fiction stimulated him to further endeavor. Returning to get the stranger, he allowed his fancy to roam far afield again. Thus the injured man, considerably relieved by the drug, was enabled to hear a tale of Harperian prowess when they turned into the highway and toward Springfield.

"You know, I didn't steal this flivver, after all," said Harper.

"Yeh?" There was a quick, questioning look.

"I was all set to, but I happened to see a crap game going on next to the garage. Well, I was practically clean you might say—that is, I wasn't any dirtier than two bits makes you." Harper paused to enjoy the effect of his words. How glibly he had used the hobo argot of the stranger! How readily he had acquired the conversational swagger of the seasoned adventurer!

"But I had that lucky feeling," Harper went on after the pause. "You know how it is. So I chucked the two bits in and won. I—I didn't give 'em any rest after that."

At this point Harper began to feel handicapped by lack of a proper dice vocabulary. A finished recital, he realized, would include details of the game's most dramatic high spots, with specific

mention of numbers, stakes, and the baffled comments of his adversaries; but Harper was not sure whether craps involved two dice or three, whether seven was open sesame or a shut shekel. So he played safe and brief with this all-inclusive summary.

"I run that two-bits up to fifty dollars quicker'n those fellows know what it was all about. I took all their money. Believe me, they're light! Clean and light. Anyway, the flivver I'd figured on stealing was gone by that time; so I just stepped into the garage and rented this one."

"Brother, you're all right!" The stranger grinned, squeezing Harper's arms.

He began to ask Harper questions about his particular means of livelihood—"racket," the stranger called it—and the man who had revolted against the humdrum found himself becoming more and more embarrassed. He was not an apt liar. His name, he said, was Jones. "Yes, honest! Tom Jones, same as my father." His occupation was—well, it was gambling; craps, poker, horse races, anything. His home town, one might say, was New York.

At last, in a desperate effort to turn the conversation, Harper inquired about his companion's injured foot.

"It's all right," said the stranger. "Guess I'd've flopped if you didn't get that junk."

"But I don't see yet why you insist on going clear to Springfield for a doctor."

The other thought for a moment. "Well, I'll tell you, brother. I got in a fight down the line with a—with a guy I don't like. He plugged my foot with a bullet."

"Oh, a bullet wound! But what difference does that make?"

"Nothing; only the docs got to report to the cops if they get a bullet case. Get the idea? I don't want to talk to the cops, being a hobo. They'd throw

me in the boob for vagrancy. They always do."

"I see. You been hoboing a good many years, I guess?"

"Yeh; a good many years."

"Been all over, eh?"

"Yeh; pretty much all over."

"Madagascar?"

"Huh?"

"I say, have you been in any other countries?"

"Just Mexico and down to Honduras, once."

"Gosh!"

For a while, then, they rode through the night in silence. Harper was thinking of his own past years, weighing them in the balance against the years of this calm, competent wanderer riding at his side. The scale told the story; nor was Harper any more pleased than Myrtle, once so slender, when she watched the indicator unerringly travel across its widening arc. For Harper's years were dull and heavy; and the stranger's, he knew, were light with life's own free breath.

At last Harper's thoughts sifted down to a question, which he mulled over for half a mile before he asked it. The question was: "What started you hoboing, anyway? Just the itch to?"

"No." The stranger grinned. "No; matter of fact, I wanted to be a jeweler. Wouldn't nothing suited me better than puttering with gems and watches and all that stuff. In fact"—with a fainter grin—"I still like 'em!"

"Well, there's good money in jewelry, all right."

"Yes; there sure is. I was in with an old fellow down in—down in my home town." He paused a second, as though weighing a thought. "Down in Alabama, in fact. I'm a Southerner. Well, he was teaching me the business; he was going to take me in for a partner, being about to retire, himself."

"You don't say! What happened?"

"The usual thing—a woman."

"A woman?" repeated Harper, plainly puzzled.

The stranger looked across at a farmhouse—a thing of comfortable shadows, with one upper window pleasantly alight. Their flivver dipped into a decline and the farmhouse vanished from sight.

"She gave me the gate," he went on evenly, as though stating an impersonal fact. "We had the date all fixed—the parson waiting, as the song says—and then she lambs away with another guy. So, like a damn' fool, I chucked the whole works and hit the road."

"You don't say!" muttered Harper, and again the two men were silent.

They struck a hundred yards of rough detour, where the road had been torn up by the highway gang. The flivver groaned and sputtered, but it did not falter. Harper's expression relaxed as he felt the road again.

"Once, about a year later, I decided to bump off the guy that married her," said the stranger, as though talking to himself. "God, but that was a cold winter! I nearly froze to death coming down through Michigan. And all I could think of was that lucky guy all happy and comfortable in my girl's arms." The stranger looked at Harper and laughed. "Brother, believe me, that's *some* feeling!"

"I'll bet you. Never had it myself, though. Never knew the right girl, I guess. But—what did you do?"

"Nothing. Blew into the town where they lived and got grabbed first thing for vagrancy. By the time I got out of the boob I'd changed my mind!"

"Gosh!" gasped Harper. Then, as he began to realize the hair-trigger delicacy of fate's fine balance, he asked: "Say, that fellow never did know how close he come to joining the angels—did he?"

"Well, I didn't tell him. Fact, I lambed out of town sudden and never even saw him—nor her, neither."

"Never saw her at all, eh?"

"No. Don't even know if she's still alive."

Another gray farmhouse loomed momentarily beside the highway, and again the stranger stared at it. After a few seconds he spoke, quite without bitterness—merely as a detached observer commenting upon something which does not in the least concern him.

"If she had not double crossed me, I'd probably be a rich jeweler now, and belong to the Kiwanis, and have some kids in college, instead of——" He looked at Harper and laughed. "What d'you know about that! Funny, hey?"

"It certainly is," agreed Harper, thinking sourly of Myrtle.

CHAPTER VI.

BENEATH THE STARS.

ABOUT two in the morning Harper bade good-by to the stranger. They had come to a road house near the outskirts of Springfield, and there the injured man was taken in hand by a sinister fellow who regarded Harper with puzzled, distrustful eyes. The stranger's condition had become critical during the last hour of that bounding journey. He was almost unconscious.

"Bye, brother," he said, grinning feebly. "I'll say you're a right guy! Tony! For God's sake, go easy! Tony, fix him up with half a C. He spent a lot of dough."

"No, no!" protested Harper, realizing that "half a C" must be a sum of money. He turned to the sinister Tony. "Really, now, I'm awfully dirty. I—I cleaned a crap game down in Lockwood."

"I'll say you're a right guy!" murmured the stranger, his face distorted with pain.

Then Harper went away, swaggering as he returned to the rented flivver. He was tired and contented and happy. Adventure had welcomed him with open arms, had given him bounteously of her

favours. Why, in no more than twelve hours, he had shot up a restaurant, as one might say; had fled from the police, avenged himself on Myrtle, and achieved, among several lesser hits, a home run; had hopped a freight, engaged in a life-and-death battle, and snatched his wounded comrade from the hands of an overwhelming enemy; had driven madly through the night, one hundred and fifty miles, to receive at the end the fervent benison of a discriminating veteran, double-dyed soldier of fortune—"I'll say you're a right guy!" In the last twelve hours Harper had lived more than in any two decades. He had definitely established his kinship with the hardy, unsheltered wanderers who roam the face of the earth. They were his brothers under the skin.

And now Harper felt sleepy. He would seek out some lonely crossroad and slumber beneath the stars. It was, Harper told himself, both fitting and proper that he should do so. Curled up on the flivver seat, he slept till well past dawn.

Then he drove into Springfield for breakfast. This, Harper realized, was not altogether ethical. He ought to present himself at some neighboring farmhouse and talk the good wife into giving him a hand-out; but Harper was rather particular about his breakfast, and he knew a grill in Springfield where the hot cakes were exactly to his taste. Besides—shameful admission—he wanted to wash up and buy a clean collar!

After breakfast Harper strolled down the street smoking a cigar. Something vaguely bothered him; but he was not able to place it. He had missed his usual shave; perhaps that was the trouble. Harper committed his face to a barber; but still the feeling of dissatisfaction lingered.

A shop window caught his eye as he started back to the flivver. It was a paper streamer, flung across the plate-

glass pane, which first attracted his attention. "Autumn Shoe Sale!" read the streamer. "Nothing Over \$7.50!" White-and-red ribbons led from the price to various pairs of shoes in the display case.

Harper, critically observing the layout, nodded in approval. "Just the thing!" he exclaimed half aloud. "Just the thing!" He glanced at his watch, conscious that the vague feeling of discontent had left him. "I can get back by two o'clock if I step on it. I'll phone Blodgett and get him started on the stock. By golly, we'll open that sale to-morrow!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE END OF THE ROAD.

SO Harper returned to Lawrence City. It is the way with nearly all of that gypsy breed who answer the call of the open road. The time at last comes when they yearn for the old home town—the elm trees and the courthouse, the little white church at the corner, the ramshackle shed where they played their first game of pool, the honest old faces which had always been so friendly. And Harper was no different. He had grown weary of trekking the distant lanes, tired of the far, far places. He longed for the old familiar town. The homing call was tingling in his bosom.

Yes; the wanderer had returned. Across the window of Harper's store was flung a paper streamer: "Autumn Shoe Sale—Nothing Over \$7.50!" Outside in Green Street one felt the touch of frost. Never had his shop seemed more comfortable, more conducive to contentment.

Ernest Pebbles, the attorney, came in to purchase; a slow, methodical, cautious personage, Ernest. Harper had known him since boyhood. He would prepare a cut-and-dried suit for collection with all the precise care of a supreme-court appeal involving millions. There was one highlight, however, in

Ernest's life—ten or twelve years before, he had got intoxicated on wine! Some wag, it seems, led him to believe the stuff was cider.

"What you been doing to your forehead, Brother Harper?" drawled Ernest Pebbles, the attorney.

Harper's eyes shone as he looked up from the long, flat foot in its well-darned cotton sock. The old fossil had noticed his box-car wound, which was giving blessed promise of leaving a permanent scar. So far Harper had kept his secret to himself, biding an auspicious moment for its telling. However, the present temptation was strong. He would thrill old Ernest Pebbles by dropping a few mysterious hints about that primitive combat.

Then an abrupt change came over Harper. He felt immeasurably superior to common folk like Ernest. He was conscious of having transcended the experience of ordinary mortals. Why, Attorney Pebbles—poor plodding drone—could not even understand! He would think Harper had gone temporarily crazy. Adventure could never enter that humdrum, dried-out soul.

"Oh, I just bumped it against the door," Harper answered carelessly. "How's that feel in the toe? Too tight?"

Just after lunch, Sheriff John Saunders came in. Another old customer was the sheriff, and a good official, too. Folks like to tell about the way he out-smarted those three Chicago gangsters who robbed old man Schweitzer and nearly beat him to death. Harper—being chairman of the Kiwanis Club's committee on crime prevention—always waited on the sheriff, himself.

"Well, John!" Harper greeted the official. "I haven't seen you in a long while. How's that old bunion setting?"

"Not bad, Henry. I think them last shoes sort of give it a rest."

"That's fine—fine. Glad to hear it, John. Got some good-looking tan

bluchers in now. They'd just set you off great."

"All right, Henry. Let's see 'em."

Harper started back toward the sliding ladder, but a sudden boyish notion caused him to turn. "By the way, John, I heard a couple of fellows talking about a brakeman getting beat up somewheres between here and Lockwood. Hear anything?"

"I'll say I did! I'm looking for one of 'em now."

"You are! Wh-which one, John?"

"The biggest one. He just about killed that brakeman. Knocked him unconscious with his bare fists!"

"You don't say!" exclaimed Harper, staring incredulously. Biggest one! And the stranger had been at least two inches shorter than Harper!

"Yes," said the sheriff, wagging his head with dubious concern. "He'll be a mean one to handle, all right."

"Mean, huh?" Harper seized eagerly upon the adjective. "A bad customer, eh, John?"

"I'll say so!" returned the sheriff. "Ain't going to take any chances if I ever run across him."

"Taking no chances on that one, eh, John?"

"I'll say I ain't!"

"Gosh, he must be a regular terror!" muttered Harper, and as he turned back to the ladder he walked with a swagger.

His mind was in something of a whirl while he searched aloft for the proper shoes. Sheriff Saunders' feet were a distinct 12-d; but Harper kept poking among the 7-a boxes. In his present emotional turmoil it seemed to be an obsession.

Then he thought of the stranger. Didn't the sheriff want him also? Harper twisted around on the ladder and called down—as chairman of the Kiwanis Club's committee on crime prevention discussing a pertinent case with the county's chief law enforcer. "How about the other one, John—the

little fellow? Aren't you looking for him, too?"

"Nope," the sheriff answered. "He's out of my jurisdiction."

"How's that?"

"Coroner's case."

Harper clung tightly to the ladder.

"Got a call from Springfield no more'n an hour ago," the official said.

"He died of blood poison from a bullet wound. He's the one tried to pull that jewelry robbery Wednesday down at Brightson. Got shot—lost his gun—just escaped by the skin of his teeth. This other fellow must've been an accomplice."

Harper, still hanging to the ladder, could say nothing. The perspiration stood out on his forehead and made his battle wound tingle.

Sheriff Saunders, who rather enjoyed the glory attached to his office, went on talking, for two other customers were raptly listening. "Funny thing, Henry

—Brightson was this little fellow's home town. He was a slick crook, too; I've never met 'em slicker. He was wanted for big jobs in four or five States. And then he goes down to a little town like Brightson and gets winged! Bernie Rand was his name—Bernie Rand, alias 'Wingo,' alias Moore, alias——"

"Bernie Rand!" Harper gulped, scarcely able to articulate. "Why—why, he's—he was Myrtle's——"

"Yep; that's what they christened him—Bernie Rand. They say he was once as fine a fellow as you'd ever want to meet. Prosperous, too; a partner in this same jewelry store he tried to rob. And then—without any warning, mind you—he up and goes bad. Turned crook overnight, practically. Just went bad for no reason at all."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Harper, coming shakily down the ladder with a pair of lady's slippers—size 4-aa.



WHAT HE WANTED

By James A. Sanaker

IF I were rich enough, I guess
 I'd never feel much lonesomeness.
 I'd buy a great big house in town
 And keep some kids upstairs and down.
 I'd buy a place beside a brook
 And put more kids in every nook.
 I'd fix a hotel by the sea
 And put more children in it, free.
 The reason this would give me joy?
 Alas, I have no girl or boy!



IN trying to run down a gigantic band of international criminals then using England as its scene of operations, Peter Foyle, a young Londoner whose uncle, Sir Herbert Mandeville, headed a security department of the government, went one night to Limehouse, London's Chinatown. There, after "rescuing" an attractive girl from the hands of two men whom Foyle mistook in the darkness for thugs, but who were policemen trying to arrest her, he soon learned that the young woman, who was of Russian descent and went by the name of Nadia, was an important part of the crime ring he was pursuing. Posing as a criminal, Foyle was made a member of the organization, headed by Paul Vivanti, a notorious world crook. For the time Foyle was held practically a prisoner. His delay in returning to his apartment caused dismay to Tom Dommert, Foyle's manservant.

Benjamin Blessington, a man of mystery, had obtained the confidence of Sir Herbert Mandeville. Blessington, who claimed to be working on an invention which would revolutionize warfare, rented an old place called Dipper's-dyke, near an obscure village. As his secretary he took with him Sylvia Fowke, a young woman in whom Fowke was greatly interested.

Miss Fowke soon found that she was working in a place of mystery. She was forbidden to leave the grounds. One night she discovered a hidden passage to some rooms in one of which she saw a man who was almost a

counterpart of Blessington. Alarmed, she sent word to Foyle to come to Dipper's-dyke. Dommert got the note instead of the absent Foyle, and the servant hastened to the country house, arriving just in time to snatch Miss Fowke from the grasp of a man who seemed to be a confederate of Blessington. Then in a moment Dommert himself was overwhelmed by a number of onrushing thugs. In the meantime, Peter Foyle was being held at the headquarters of the criminal band in London.

CHAPTER XXII.

FACE TO FACE.

BE at your best," Nadia told Peter Foyle; "you have to meet the chief, to whom you will soon go."

Back at the house in Chinatown, to which he had been taken after the theft of the Countess of Warringham's necklace, Foyle waited for developments. These came with the words of the woman Nadia as she entered the room, her exotically beautiful face flushed and her demeanor indicative of suppressed excitement.

"The chief?" Foyle asked. "Do you mean No. 1?" He was excited, too;

but he had sense enough not to allow too much of his mental state to be seen.

"Yes. And much will depend upon the impression you make upon him. He was leaving London to-night; but, having heard of your success in the first test, he has stayed on. He wishes to see you straight away. It is a great honor for you."

Foyle simply said "Yes." However, he realized that this meeting was likely to be something more than an "honor;" it probably would be a test.

The impression that soon he would stand face to face with Vivanti set his nerves thrilling. He had tried in vain to probe the identity of the mysterious No. 1, who he understood controlled the activities of the crime trust. "Tell me what sort of a man No. 1 is," he said to Nadia.

"He is a great man!" she replied warmly. "A great man to serve! The rest you must discover for yourself; it is not for me to speak. He knows that I proposed you for membership—that is all I can tell you. One thing, though, I would say—do not attempt to deceive him in any way. He can read the mind like an open book. And he will order you to be killed if he thinks that you are not entirely above suspicion. You have started well; do not spoil the good impression you have already made when you stand before No. 1. Remember that I wish you well, and that I, as your sponsor, will be held partly responsible if you fail."

"I will try not to fail."

Failure, indeed, Peter Foyle knew would mean certain death. It had been no mere melodramatic threat that Nadia had uttered. The leaders of the crime trust were playing for too big stakes to allow one man's life to stand in the way of their plans. From now on a sudden and violent end would stalk him incessantly. Yet the prospect of having his conjecture verified—of looking into the hateful face of Paul Vivanti again

—stimulated rather than depressed. He felt he was making progress.

He was given fashionably cut clothes to put on which fitted him as though he had been measured for them. Thus attired, he submitted himself to be blindfolded again. He was to go on another journey evidently.

Once again he had the strange sensation of being driven across London, and yet of not knowing in which direction he was taken. And by and by he stood in a room that he guessed from its furnishing must be in the West End. He no longer was blindfolded, much to his relief.

One of Foyle's hobbies, as has been mentioned, was amateur theatricals. A famous actor had taught him the essential actor's art of controlling the facial muscles so as to alter expression and even in some degree the contour of the face. On the chance of Vivanti's—if the mysterious No. 1 should prove to be Paul Vivanti—recognizing him from days gone by, he put this trick into operation now.

A door opened. A man stepped into the room. If he had not been prepared, Foyle must inevitably have given himself away; for the man who now walked toward him, fixing him with his remarkable eyes, was indeed the former nerve specialist of Harley Street—Doctor Paul Vivanti!

"Your name is Jerningham?"

How well Foyle remembered that voice! "Jerningham" was Foyle's middle name, and he had given that to the society when he had been admitted.

"It is," Foyle replied.

"Sit down."

Foyle, nicknamed "Lulu" at Eton on account of his attractive features, was relieved. During that brief but searching scrutiny from Vivanti he had apparently passed muster.

"I see every new member of my organization," Vivanti started to explain. "That was why I have sent for you.

You understand fully the risks you run in working for me?"

"I am ready to take them."

"You understand that the least treachery will be met by death?"

"I have already been warned about that."

"But those who work well and faithfully have other rewards. You can soon be a rich man, Jerningham, if you show the same courage and resource as you evidenced in the matter of the Countess of Wardingham's necklace. You were not aware, I suppose, that the thing you risked so much for was merely a worthless imitation of the genuine article?"

"What!" he cried. This was rather a neat bit of acting, he flattered himself.

Vivanti smiled. "I am sorry to inform you such is the case. Of course, you are not to blame; the fault, if any, was with the particular departmental chief of the organization who deputed to you the task; but, financially—since all my agents work on a commission basis, plus a fixed salary—you will be considerably the loser. Should you have gained for us the genuine necklace instead of merely the fake, you would have been the richer by one thousand pounds, Jerningham."

"The devil!" snapped the recruit. "But perhaps I shall have another job soon! I hope so."

"Enthusiasm is one of the traits I like to see displayed by my agents. Yes, Jerningham; having seen you and formed my opinion, I have decided to place a very important commission in your hands."

"I want to make good," the new member replied eagerly.

"The organization of which I am the supreme head," continued Vivanti, his eyes aglow, "will shortly have in its possession the greatest destructive implement that science has yet evolved. The money which the ownership of such

an instrument can bring to its possessor is incalculable. I will not say more on that point for the moment, but will confine myself to your duties in this new mission.

"For this task you seem particularly well adapted, Jerningham," Vivanti continued. "It is not a dangerous task; the only danger you will encounter is from the other members of the organization should you attempt to give any information to the police."

"Good God! How many more times do you want to threaten me? Haven't I proved already that I'm against the police, the swine?"

"You will not lose your temper, Jerningham. Such a weakness is always dangerous, while it is particularly dangerous when dealing with me."

"I'm sorry. I did not mean——"

"Until we have proved a recruit, it is absolutely essential from the point of view of the organization that we should constantly instill into him fear of the personal danger he runs should he attempt the slightest treachery to either the organization as a whole or to its least important member.

"Your task," Vivanti went on, "will be to go to the town mentioned on this list"—holding out a small sheet of paper—"and buy a house overlooking the harbor or arsenal. You understand the position—this house which you will purchase—under a fictitious name, of course—must possess a commanding view of the harbor. You will pose as a young artist or writer who wishes to live in solitude in order to do some work. You will keep in close touch with me."

"Where shall I write?" inquired Foyle.

"All further instructions will be sent to you before you start."

Vivanti came closer to look into the eyes of the recruit. "Carry out this duty satisfactorily, and you will be well paid; bungle it, or give us the least

cause for anxiety, and you'll be shown no mercy! And, above all, remember this: The inevitable consequence of treachery is death!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FROM ACROSS THE SEA.

NOT many hours after Peter Foyle had received his instructions from Vivanti, Sir Herbert Mandeville could have been seen pacing restlessly up and down his room in Whitehall. London had been ransacked for any trace of Foyle, but not a shred of information had been available. What was even more perplexing, an inquiry at the flat in The Albany had disclosed the fact that Dommett, Foyle's man, had also disappeared.

The official's perturbed perambulations were interrupted by a secretary bringing in a visiting card.

Sir Herbert took the piece of pasteboard irritably. "Who is it now, Stevens?"

The secretary coughed. "Rather a determined-looking person, chief," he replied; "speaks with an American accent, and says he has come straight here from Sir Robert at the Yard.

The official glanced at the card, which read:

"John D. Gilbert, New York City."

There was something so pleasingly terse about the lettering that Sir Herbert Mandeville would have consented to a short interview in any case, no doubt; but after one glance at the visiting card, he said to his secretary: "Show Mr. Gilbert in at once, Stevens!"

A heavily built man, with a strong, determined, but pleasant face, shook hands with him a moment later.

"This is a great pleasure, Mr. Gilbert," the government official told him in a tone that was almost conciliatory; "of course, your name is very familiar"—both smiled as though the speaker had made a joke—"but this is the first oc-

casión I have had the honor of meeting you. Still in the U. S. secret service, I take it?"

"Yes—and no," drawled the visitor. "When a man reaches my age—I shall be fifty-two next March—it's time he began to take things easy, Sir Herbert."

"I wish I could!" The harassed official sighed.

The man from America nodded in sympathy. "Yours must be a hell of a job. You were wondering what I'm doing over in England."

"I haven't asked you, Mr. Gilbert, but, of course, I should very much like to know."

"Well, as I was saying just now, when a man gets into his fifties it's time that he left the rough and tumble. So, while I am still attached to the United States secret service for any special duty, I am running a bureau of my own in Seventh Avenue, New York. Work has come in so fast that I thought I'd take a short holiday. Of course, there were one or two reasons why I chose England specially, fond as I am of this fine city." He looked out of the window into Whitehall and smiled like a man who views a place he loves.

"If I can do anything, Mr. Gilbert."

The visitor turned around in his chair. "There's been a lot of funny things happening lately in practically every big city of the States," he said seriously; "and, putting two and two together, I've got a sort of hunch that these are operated from a distance. Jewel robberies, holdups, banks raided, blackmail, girls kidnaped.

"Say, Sir Herbert," the newcomer continued, his voice taking on a sterner tone, "there's every kind of devilry let loose over in the States, and my opinion is that somewhere at a safe distance is a number-one size crook with a whole lot of brains in his head pulling the strings. Try as hard as we like, we haven't been able to get a line on him at home; so I suggested that, as I was

coming over on a holiday anyway, I should make a few inquiries here myself, and the service chief said: "Go to it!"

"What is your idea, Mr. Gilbert—a colossal criminal gang with a crooked genius at the head?"

"Sounds like a dime novel; but that is my opinion, all the same. Every hundred years or so there springs up a genius in the crook line just like in any other form of business; but, if I am right in my guess, this present fellow is the real cat's pajamas. The sooner he's put away, all snug and safe, the better it will be for us all."

The government official drummed on his desk with an ivory paper knife. "Your reputation, Mr. Gilbert, enables me to speak quite frankly to you. A short time back certain information came to me which forced me to the same conclusion as yourself; namely, that a new and very powerful gang of criminals had recently been formed, probably directed by a man of exceptional ability and daring; that their operations, recently very extensive, have spread throughout the world, and that their headquarters might possibly be in London. It would take me too long to go into details; but, as I have said, I was forced to that opinion."

The man from New York City nodded. "I am happy to think that our two minds have run on the same lines, Sir Herbert."

The remark was apparently not heard, for Sir Herbert continued: "I don't mind telling you that I am worried. Of course, I always have the assistance of Scotland Yard."

"A fine bunch of boys!" commented the visitor.

"But the main responsibility falls on my department," finished Sir Herbert, "and, as the chief of it, I naturally have to shoulder the blame when anything—anything serious—happens. Something serious has happened, Mr. Gilbert."

"Yes?" The caller removed the cigar from his mouth and became alert.

"I have a nephew. He is what you would call in your expressive vocabulary, no doubt, a 'lounge lizard;' that is to say, he doesn't do any regular work, but lounges his time away in seeking pleasure and excitement. The trouble with him is that he has a comfortable income, and there is no need for him to augment it. Despite his idle habits, he has proved himself on at least one important occasion to be a person of unusual resource and high personal courage, however, and I am very fond of him."

"Sure!"

"I am very fond of him," repeated the government official. "Some short time ago I mentioned the fact to him in confidence that I suspected this criminal gang of which we have just been talking had begun operations in England. Almost immediately afterward he disappeared."

"Disappeared! Say, what was the idea?"

"That is what I would give a very great deal to discover. To complicate things still more, I now find that my nephew's manservant is also missing."

"What's at the back of your mind, Sir Herbert?"

"I scarcely like to dwell on the subject, but—well, to be frank, I am afraid that Foyle, that is my nephew's name——"

"Do you mind telling me his full name, Sir Herbert?" The man from New York produced a small notebook.

"Peter Jerningham Foyle," replied the official, and the other wrote it down.

"I was saying," resumed Sir Herbert Mandeville with a faint show of impatience, "that I am afraid Foyle, who is always mixing with extraordinary people, got a clew somehow about this gang and followed it up."

"Bully for Foyle! I hope to run across this nephew of yours."

"I only wish you may! But can't you see how worried it makes me, man? I haven't had a line or a message from Peter since he disappeared. He just vanished. My fear is that he has been murdered. If the men who are acting as leaders for this gang knew that he was related to me as head of this government department, his life wouldn't be worth an hour's purchase."

The visitor put his hand on the other's shoulder. "Can't the Yard help you out any?"

"They haven't been able to get the slightest clew."

"Well, cheer up, Sir Herbert! My experience is that nothing's ever quite so bad as what we imagine it to be, you know. One day Mr. Foyle will probably come bouncing in here with a bagful of news."

The visitor was about to leave the room when a secretary announced another visitor.

"Assistant Commissioner Morton of Scotland Yard, Sir Herbert."

"You needn't go, Mr. Gilbert," said the government official. This man gave him a certain confidence, and he liked him personally. "You haven't met Morton, have you?"

"Nope. I'd like to stay if I may."

"Good." Sir Herbert Mandeville pressed the bell on his desk.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FLOWER GIRL.

WHEN he had come into the room, Assistant Commissioner Morton showed himself to be a carefully dressed man of about forty-five, with a rather pompous, overbearing manner. He nodded carelessly to the American and then coughed. "I rather wanted to see you in private, Sir Herbert."

The man from the United States took the hint and arose.

"It was at my invitation that Mr. Gilbert stayed when your name was an-

nounced, Morton. Our friend from New York promised to lend us a hand in dealing with the mystery gang that has been troubling us."

The assistant commissioner smiled in rather a superior manner. "I have my own ideas about that gang. If you don't mind, I won't put them into words now; I would prefer to wait, with your permission, to see if I am correct. I believe I am, but—well, I'd rather wait."

The official frowned. "As you like, Morton," he said with a touch of austerity. "What was it you wished to see me about?"

"The Blandford case."

The Blandford case being a mere matter of a routine murder charge, interest in the conversation languished. The American, excusing himself, went to the window and looked out upon Whitehall, the street which he said he never tired of regarding.

"That's fine!" he remarked to himself. Below him a London flower girl was selling her wares to the passers-by. A remarkably pretty girl she was, and her stock of roses and carnations was being rapidly depleted.

Mandeville touched a bell, not the one that summoned Stevens. "Sander-son, bring some glasses."

The servant produced a decanter of whisky, a siphon of soda water, and three tumblers.

"Really, Mr. Gilbert, you must excuse my forgetfulness before," Sir Herbert apologized; "fancy not offering a visitor from America a drink! You will have one now?"

The man from the States raised his glass. "To the beating of the gang!" he gave as a toast.

Smiling in that superior manner which both found irritating, Assistant Commissioner Morton drained his drink. "I'll be seeing you again tomorrow, Sir Herbert," he remarked, his hand on the door. "Good-by, Mr. Gilbert!"

"That fellow would have talked if I hadn't been here, Sir Herbert; I ought to have gone."

"Personally, and between ourselves, Gilbert, I haven't an overwhelming confidence in Morton; he's inclined to be too cocksure," commented the official; "what is it you find so interesting down there?" Sir Herbert crossed to the side of the other, who was still staring out of the window.

"I was wondering who she was keeping that last rose for," said the American, as though communing with himself; "our friend Morton is apparently as fond of roses as he is of a pretty face."

Sir Herbert Mandeville looked down. A remarkably pretty flower girl was pinning a red rose, the last of her morning's stock, into the buttonhole of Assistant Commissioner Morton of Scotland Yard.

"Evidently," Sir Herbert commented dryly. He was about to turn away when the visitor clutched his arm.

Morton, crossing the street, suddenly staggered, swayed, and then collapsed in a heap.

"My God!" cried the American.

"What!" exclaimed the astonished official. Suddenly, looking around, he found that the caller had vanished.

"The commissioner must have died almost at once," announced the distinguished surgeon who had been summoned hurriedly to Sir Herbert Mandeville's office, where the body had been taken.

"The cause, doctor?" asked John D. Gilbert of New York, who had returned to the room.

"Heart failure. Although, otherwise, he seemed fit enough; as strong as an ox." The medical expert's voice sounded puzzled.

"These purple patches, doctor?" persisted Gilbert.

"Really——?" the surgeon started to

protest. This blunt questioner was a stranger, and he did not care to commit himself to too many definite opinions before the autopsy; but those huge purple patches were certainly damnably mysterious.

"Mr. Gilbert is a famous detective—an American—and a friend of mine, Anstruthers," put in Sir Herbert Mandeville. "I shall be obliged if you will tell him all you can."

The distinguished doctor became frank. "There is very little I can tell you as yet, beyond the fact that Mr. Morton, whom I should have judged to be a man in splendid physical condition, undoubtedly died of heart failure. These purple patches may have a significance, but until I have conducted a post-mortem examination I cannot tell you anything about them. Certainly I have never seen anything like them before."

Gilbert nodded. He was vexed with himself. The flower girl whom he had rushed out to find had become lost in the crowd. He was deeply chagrined at his failure, for he had the subconscious idea that this beautiful girl had played a significant part in the startling tragedy.

CHAPTER XXV.

BEYOND THE WALL.

THAT he must have died and come to life again was the first bewildered impression Tom Dommatt had when, after blinking his eyes several times and rubbing the top of his head, where there was a bump as big as an egg, he looked around him.

He was in a sort of cellar. There was no furniture of any kind in the place, but a stone seat fixed into the wall ran along one side of the room.

Recollections came crowding back to him once he had regained his senses. He remembered everything clearly—how he had set out from the flat in The Albany, armed with the note calling for

help; how he had stumbled about in the darkness, had fallen into a long passage somewhere underground; how, after wandering about for some time, he had heard a girl cry; how he had rushed to the rescue; how the girl had asked him where Mr. Foyle was; how he had pushed her through some kind of door and had then fought against a mob of murderous swine.

"They knocked me out," he told himself perplexedly, "an' now what's goin' to happen?"

Feeling that bump on the top of his head again, he realized that he was lucky to be still living. And the determination to continue to live grew stronger as the narrowness of his escape dawned upon him. He had to live if only to get square with these swine. And the girl—where was she? Had those devils got hold of her again?

That girl was in love with his master. And he would bet his bottom "bob" that Foyle was in love with her. Who wouldn't be?

Dommett reflected on this surprising discovery for some minutes and then stepped carefully across to the heavy door. It was locked. As he stood, his head throbbing and his body alert, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He would have to be foxy to beat these swine, Dommett reflected. Lowering himself cautiously to the stone floor, he lay still.

The door opened, and a man carrying an electric torch entered. A careful look warned Dommett that he had a revolver in his right hand; otherwise he would have changed his rôle of the unconscious man very quickly. One shot, however, from that revolver would probably have meant death to him, and he eagerly desired to live.

The man flashed the torch in his face, and Dommett resolutely kept himself from blinking. A grunt of satisfaction told him that the other appeared pleased with his still, apparently, unconscious

condition. The door closed, and he was alone again.

Feeling that he might as well get what rest he could, and knowing that any escape for the moment would be impossible, Dommett, overcome by sudden fatigue, fell asleep.

He awoke, later, at the sound of voices. It was pitch dark, but he guessed that these came from the other side of the wall which he faced. Perhaps there was another cell there.

"Your time limit is up, Blessington," said a voice that was so cold and merciless it made the ex-pugilist involuntarily shiver; "I have been patient with you, but now the end has come. If you still persist in being obstinate I shall take such measures as will make you long for death."

A voice answered, a voice hoarse with agony. "You devil! You inhuman devil!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON THE RACK.

ON the other side of the stone wall that cut off Dommett's vision, a strange scene was being enacted. A man, whose worn and wasted face reflected the most terrible tortures of mind and body, was stretched upon an ingenious instrument that medieval torturers would have recognized as the rack. Stripped to his underclothes, this poor wretch was slowly having his limbs stretched until they were almost torn from their sockets.

Looking at him was a seated man, who had a small, almost childish frame. His pallid cheeks, red lips, and dark, glowing eyes made up a face on which evil was triumphantly enthroned.

Still looking at his helpless victim, Paul Vivanti gave a sign, and the two men stationed one at either end of the rack, pulled the levers they held.

"Gag him!" ordered Vivanti as screams of fresh, intolerable agony came from the tortured man. "Now, listen,

Blessington," Vivanti said in the tone of a wise man talking to a fool; "you can save yourself all further trouble by giving your consent. Will you do so?"

The man on the rack hesitated—and then shook his head.

To the surprise of the two torturers, Vivanti did not fly into a fresh fury of rage at this continued obstinacy. Instead, his tone became almost wheedling. "Of course, I know all your objections, Blessington. You are an idealist apart from being an inventive genius; but, like all idealists, you are foolish to the point of imbecility. You think that the machine which you have almost completed—and which you certainly will have to complete for me unless you wish to die literally by inches—will prevent all future war. You hope that you will be able to place England, a country which you admire even more than your native America because your parents happened to be born in Kent, secure from any invading force. You have natural objections to handing over your completed invention to a man whom you have reason to suspect." Here the speaker permitted himself a grim smile. Then he went on:

"Of course! As I say, that is only natural; but you will have to be persuaded. I have never told you before, Blessington, but what I propose to do with your invention once it is in my possession is this: I intend to blow England to hell first and then hand your machine over to the highest bidder among the foreign powers! A—er—gentleman is due to arrive in England any day now.

"So you see, my dear Blessington, that I cannot afford to wait any longer. You damned fool!" Vivanti cried, his voice now in a crescendo. "Do you think I will allow your cursed obstinacy to stand in the way of my plans? Complete your invention or die in torture! Which is it to be?"

The eyes of the man on the rack

looked at his tormentor steadily. But he made no signal.

Again Vivanti gave his sign. Two minutes later he ordered the torture to stop. His wretched victim had nodded his head in submission.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE OPENED DOOR.

THE first impulse that Sylvia Fowke had after escaping through the secret opening into the library was to rush to her room. Locking the door, she tried to regain some control of her nerves. She could only hope the man who rescued her had escaped; but had he? If he had not, he might be killed, and then there would be no one who could get into touch with Peter Foyle.

What had happened to Foyle? And why had he vanished just when she wanted him? However, she wouldn't give up hope. He was bound to come sooner or later; but would it be too late?

It was a night of torture for Sylvia. She was afraid to leave her room, and afraid to ring, since she did not know who would answer the summons. And she could do nothing herself but think.

It was with mixed emotions that at nine o'clock the next morning she went down to breakfast. She expected to be greeted by a scowl; but, on the contrary, her employer smiled almost affectionately as she took her seat.

"Ready for work, Miss Fowke?"

"Quite ready, Mr. Blessington."

Conversation languished after that. Then, feeling that things could not go on in this way any longer, Sylvia said sharply: "Some time ago, Mr. Blessington, I said that if I were insulted again by that man with a scar over his left eye, who you stated was a friend of yours, I should leave immediately. I must tell you that last night when you were away I was again most abominably insulted by him!"

"I am sorry to hear this, Miss Fowke. Where were you at the time?"

She did not immediately answer. In her eagerness to try to draw out this man, she had forgotten the risk to herself; but now she could tell by the very suavity of her employer's tone that she had gone too far.

"Giolatti—that is the name of the man with the scar, as you call him—has certain duties here," Blessington said. "One of the most important is to keep away inquisitive persons from the scene of my experiments. I understand from him that he caught you in the passages beneath the house last night trying to open a certain door. May I be so bold as to ask the reason why you wished to see beyond that door, Miss Fowke?"

Feeling certain now that this man was trying to "pump" her, Sylvia decided to fence with him. "When I was in the village the other day the lady at the draper's told me some perfectly ridiculous story about this house being haunted. I was in the library getting a book when I thought I heard shuffling sounds. I was frightened and rushed toward the door. In doing so I tripped over the carpet.

"In putting out a hand to save myself," Sylvia went on, "I pressed a knob on the mantelpiece, and a panel to the left glided open. Naturally I was curious, and so I went down. But I had no idea that you were conducting any experiments beneath the house; you had always given me to understand that you worked in the west wing."

"Some of my work is done in the west wing, Miss Fowke," Blessington told her. Then, as though the subject was distasteful, he continued: "There is no need for anything more to be said, except for me to apologize if Giolatti handled you roughly."

"He is a beast—a brute! It is no business of mine, of course; but I cannot understand, Mr. Blessington, why

you permit such a man to be associated with you. Anyhow, I shall not allow myself to be insulted by him again. I wish to resign my post, Mr. Blessington, and to leave here at once."

The idea had suddenly come to her to test the man further in this manner. If he were honest, he would not place any obstacle in her way. If he were not honest, he would."

"I am afraid I cannot accept your resignation, Miss Fowke." Sylvia gasped at these words, and Blessington went on: "You see, I shall be left in the lurch, as it were. I do wish you would reconsider the matter, my dear young lady. In any case, if the work is distasteful to you, you need not be troubled with it much longer. In the early hours of this morning I completed my experiments and I am happy now to be able to say that my invention is practically finished."

"Then I can go, Mr. Blessington?"

He rose from the table. "I believe you to be an honest person, Miss Fowke, but until I consider it safe and politic for you to do so, I regret to say that you must remain in this house. The fate of your country is in the balance. In such a contingency I am not prepared to allow any one inside this house to leave it until I give the necessary permission."

"That means you intend to keep me here against my will? I am virtually a prisoner!"

Her employer made a gesture with the hands she disliked. "You are taking an altogether unjustified view, Miss Fowke. And now, if you please, we will go into the library. I have a lot to do, and you shall show me this interesting secret passage."

Discretion and anger fought for the mastery—and discretion won. Sylvia Fowke was a very sensible girl. "I do not wish to appear unreasonable, Mr. Blessington," she said.

"Then we will say nothing more about

the matter." Her employer opened the door of the library for her.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MISSING BUTLER.

THAT he was followed, Lulu Foyle felt certain. In fact, no sooner had he arrived at a certain decision than the man he guessed was his shadower entered the tube train and sat down opposite him. This game of follow my leader had begun to pall. Ever since he had been elected a member of the order, he had not been able to stir a step without being watched. A joke was a joke, but this was too much.

He was due to report at Count Lasch's flat that night, but he intended to take the opportunity, now that he was in London, of going to The Albany. Poor old Dommett would be worried out of his life!

At Gloucester Road Foyle left the train. As he anticipated, the man who had been sitting opposite followed suit. Hearing the footsteps behind him, Foyle thought of something which made him smile. Turning around quickly, he faced the man on the practically-deserted platform.

"A damned detective, are you?" Foyle snarled with simulated ferocity, and, letting drive with his right fist, swung straight for the jaw. The man was not quick enough to avoid the blow, and, sagging like a tree in a high wind, he dropped to the platform.

Foyle rushed away. There was some shouting behind him, but he paid no heed. He ran no risks, doubling in his tracks by taking several trains in opposite directions before at last stepping out of the elevator at Dover Street station, Piccadilly. With his hat pulled well down over his eyes and his overcoat collar turned up, he walked rapidly to The Albany.

"Dommett!" he called, stepping into the hall.

There was no reply. Going into the

sitting room, he saw a piece of paper on the mantelpiece. On it was this message:

DEER GUV'NOR: On the orf chance of you comin' back 'ere I'm writin' to say I've gone to that place the hat-shop woman told about.

DOMMETT.

Foyle looked for a date. Dommett had written that note two days before.

The "hat-shop woman!" That was Eloise. Then Sylvia must have sent a message for help. To him—and he had failed her! He flung the recently lighted cigarette into the grate.

Sylvia must have been in danger, or she never would have sent for him! And days had been wasted while he had been at Portsedale buying that house! What would she think now that he had failed her?

However, stanch old Dommett had gone in his stead. Had he reached the place safely? Foyle suddenly thought of the live electric wire encircling the house at Dipper's-dyke and saw, as in a terrible dream, the body of the man who loved him, hanging across that wire. He must get down there at once. The next moment Foyle was rushing from the flat, regardless now of being seen.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"TO THE LAST CARD."

WITH all the evening papers he had bought the news of the strange death of Assistant Commissioner Morton of Scotland Yard that afternoon. Mr. John D. Gilbert sat in his hotel bedroom pondering over the event.

"Gosh, if I could have got my hands on that flower girl!" he cried. "But if I stay in this town long enough I guess I shall run across her again. And when I do!" Gilbert's large hands opened and shut in an expressive manner.

Lighting a cigar, he jumped to his feet. A subject which had been crowded out of his mind by the death of the Scotland Yard official returned.

Within fifteen minutes he stood on the threshold of the private residence of Sir Herbert Mandeville; another minute, and he was shaking hands with the government official.

"Sorry to butt in on you again, Sir Herbert," he explained "but there was something I ought to have asked you this afternoon which, owing to that poor chap's death, I entirely forgot."

"Glad to see you in any case," said his host; "what is it you want to know?"

"How that inventor chap, Blessington, is getting on?"

"Blessington! What do you know about Blessington, Gilbert?" The government official was plainly perturbed.

"I want you to feel that you can trust me down to the last card in the pack, Sir Herbert," the American said gravely; "but, first of all, I'll tell you why I have asked you that question. My wife, before she died two years ago, was a friend of Blessington's sister, who is his only living relative, I believe. Strange to say, I have never met Blessington. Like most of these extremely clever birds, he's always been a bit of a recluse."

"He did not strike me that way," remarked Mandeville. "When I met him—he called at my office soon after his arrival in England—he appeared a rather breezy, companionable individual. I put it down to his being an American."

Gilbert pulled thoughtfully at his cigar. "Well, as I say, I have never met him; but I certainly had the impression that he was very much of a recluse. However, the point is that shortly before I sailed, his sister called on me. She was very worried."

"Worried?"

"About her brother. Apparently the latter had not kept his promise of cabling at least twice a week to say that he was well and safe."

"Safe?" Sir Herbert leaned forward in his chair.

"You know, I suppose, that Blessington had his laboratory raided twice just before he left for this country?"

"I certainly didn't!" The official's expression became even more worried. "He didn't mention it to me when he was here."

"Well, it's true, anyway. As I say, Sir Herbert, I want you to feel that you can trust me all the way through, as I remarked before."

Mandeville nodded. "There is no need for you to ask me that, Gilbert."

"Thank you. Now I want to ask you one more question—is it true that Blessington is working on an invention of great importance to this country?"

"Blessington is working on an invention," replied Mandeville slowly, "which may safeguard the country that possesses it from ever being dragged into war."

The American rolled his cigar into the other corner of his mouth. "You've got him pretty safely guarded, I guess, Sir Herbert? A man whose invention could practically rule the world is——"

"He won't have any of my men near him!" snapped Mandeville. "That's the devil of it! He's a fellow you have to handle very gently. Of course, as he came over here at his own request, we had to agree to practically everything he said. I had arranged a laboratory for him, but he wouldn't have it. He said he had bought a house for himself."

"Where?" asked Gilbert quickly.

"It's a place known as Dipper's-dyke, near Shorehaven, on the Essex coast. Lonely as the devil. But the situation appealed to Blessington, who said he wasn't likely to be disturbed there. What could I do but let him have his own way? It wouldn't have done for him to have got huffy. I don't mind telling you, Gilbert, that the whole future welfare of this country may be said to depend upon Blessington!"

"All the more reason why he should be well looked after."

"But I tell you he won't have any one near him! Only last week he came up to see me and said that if I persisted in having him watched, he would throw up the whole thing and go back to America!"

"H'm! Well, I promised his sister faithfully that I would see him. You wouldn't mind giving me a note to take down to this—what do you call the place?"

"Dipper's-dyke. Of course, I shall be only too pleased. When do you intend to go?"

"To-morrow morning—early!"

With the letter of introduction in his hand, the American left the house. Standing in the shadow was a man who he felt was watching him with more than ordinary interest.

Before the man could slink away, Gilbert had brought his hand sharply down on his shoulder, and swung him around. "What are you doing here, eh?" the American asked with a growl.

The man shivered in his strong grasp. "Nothin', guv-nor, s'elp me!"

"Keep on doing nothing!" warned the detective sardonically. "For the minute you start anything I'll be on to you, Silensky!"

"God! Gilbert!" exclaimed the other, as though he had just recognized the speaker. There was fear in his voice as well as in his face.

"I've told you!" warned Gilbert again, and walked on. "They're here all right!" he muttered, "and something big is going to happen soon."

How big that "something" was, John D. Gilbert had no conception.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DISTURBING CALLER.

AFTER being called the next morning, Gilbert did not stay long in bed. He might not have cared to admit the fact, but he had slept badly. Evidence was accumulating which caused his

shrewd mind to form certain and irresistible conclusions. "And I came to London for a holiday!" he groaned.

Having had experience of some of the English train services, he wisely engaged a car for his journey. Even then he did not arrive at his destination until long after he had hoped. Drawn by the sound of the car's wheels scrunching on the gravel, a man came out of a dilapidated cottage that might once have been a lodge near the entrance gates.

"Anythin' I can do?"

"Yes. You can open the gate."

"I must know your business first, please."

"This is Mr. Blessington's residence, isn't it?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes. But Mr. Blessington's strict instructions are that no one can be admitted."

"I can understand that," Gilbert said, keeping his temper; "but I happen to have come all the way from America. Go and tell Mr. Blessington, will you, that some one who has brought a message from his sister in America would like to see him."

The man dived inside the dilapidated lodge, and slammed the door.

"Telephoning, I guess," Gilbert spoke to himself. "I'd give something to know exactly what he's saying."

There was a long wait, but at the end the man opened the great iron gates.

"I am to take you up to the house, sir. The car must remain here."

"Wait—I shan't be long," Gilbert told the driver. Then he followed his guide up the neglected carriageway.

At the entrance to the house a man dressed as a butler awaited them. "Have you a card, sir?"

Gilbert produced a visiting card, handed it to the butler—whose face he seemed to remember vaguely, but could not recall the exact circumstances—and was shown into a room. He had not been seated for more than two minutes when the door opened.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I did not know that any one was in here." A girl, whose face and appearance, it struck Gilbert, held something of fear, stood in the doorway.

Gilbert stood up. "I am only a visitor," he explained, hoping that the girl would tell him who she was; "I have called to see Mr. Blessington."

"I am Mr. Blessington's secretary, and——"

"I am attending to this gentleman, Miss Fowke," the butler, who had returned, interrupted in a forbidding tone.

The girl turned away; but before she did so she flashed Gilbert a look that made the detective ponder.

When she was out of the room, the butler spoke. "Mr. Blessington regrets, sir, that he is too busy to see you this morning. He wished me to say, sir, that he is engaged on some highly intricate work at the moment and that he is afraid he cannot break off. He is grateful to you for calling, says that he is cabling his sister to-day, but has been too busy to write before."

"I see." As a matter of fact, Gilbert didn't see; but it was the conventional thing to say in the circumstances. "Well, I'm sorry that I have come all the way to this ungodly hole from New York City to find that your master is too busy to spare me a minute. Look here, will you go back and say that I have also a letter of introduction from Sir Herbert Mandeville and that I consider it is vitally important that I should see him soon, if not at this moment, at some time to-day?"

"Certainly, sir."

Another ten minutes elapsed, then the butler reappeared. "Mr. Blessington expresses his keenest regret, but he says he cannot leave his work, sir. He wishes to send his best respects to Sir Herbert Mandeville, and he would be obliged if, upon returning to London, you would send off this cable to his sister?"

"I will certainly. Well, if he is too busy"—folding the slip of paper he had been given and putting it in his waistcoat pocket—"I must get back, I suppose."

Gilbert strolled to the door, which the butler held open, and out into the carriageway. Apart from the butler, at least three people watched him go with interest. To Sylvia Fowke he represented a forlorn chance of communicating with the outside world.

The two other watchers were men.

"I tell you I am not mistaken, chief," spoke up Giolatti, the scar over his left eye showing livid as he spoke; "it's *the* John D. Gilbert, the cleverest guy in the States. What's he doing over here?"

"You must find out," said the other man; "go to London directly it's safe and make inquiries. Get into touch with Silensky—he's been watching Mandeville's house. Get to know everything you can and then report to Lasch. But, above all, don't let him see you."

"You needn't be afraid of that!" Giolatti paused, and walked back a pace. "By the way, chief, what are you going to do with that girl? She knows too much, I keep on telling you!"

"Are you seeking to take the control of affairs out of my hands?" Blessington asked sharply.

"No, chief; certainly not!"

Giolatti, known to the New York underworld as "Gyp, the Blood," because of his dexterous deeds with a knife, was only afraid of one man in the world, and that man had just warned him. Giolatti left the room without another word.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT THE WINDOW.

SOON after the evening meal, Sylvia had gone to her room. It was only behind the locked door of her bedroom that she felt in any way safe.

She started. Was it a trick of her

nerve? Or was some one, or something, tapping gently against the window pane?

It sounded again. She jumped up from the chair and crossed cautiously to the window. A man's face was pressed against the pane.

"It's all right," said a voice.

Her heart gave a tremendous leap, for she saw the face of Peter Foyle. "Oh, my dear!" she exclaimed, stirred to the depths of her being. The dearest wish of her life had come true, and the present, in any case, was no time for the strict observance of the conventions.

She came closer and saw Foyle stretched full length along a ledge that ran round the back of the house on a level with her room.

He motioned to her to open the window. This, very cautiously, she did.

"Put out the light," he whispered; "they must not see."

She turned back swiftly and snapped down the switch. Then she went again to the window, tremulous with a strange, new-found joy.

Foyle's eyes burned into hers. "Thank God, you're safe!" he said earnestly. "I could not come before. You sent for me, Sylvia?"

"Yes, Peter." It seemed only natural that they should be using each other's Christian name.

"I was working on a job. Something that would take too long for you to listen to now. But I got back to the flat only this afternoon, after being away for several days. I found my servant gone, but he had left a note. He had come down here, he said."

"Yes; last night. I had been exploring—trying to find out some of the mysteries of the place. I was attacked in an underground passage, and—"

"Who was the man?" Foyle asked fiercely.

His anxiety was great joy to her, but she had to tell her full story. "Do not interrupt, Peter. I was attacked, but

another man, who looked like a human bulldog, came rushing up and rescued me. There is a secret passage—all this must sound frightfully weird, but it's quite true—leading from beneath the house into the library, and Dommett, for it was your man who had rescued me, managed to push me through that into safety. But he was left behind.

"I can't do anything to help him," Sylvia went on. "I haven't the power. I am kept a prisoner here. They have put these bars outside my window. But"—quickly—"you mustn't worry about me—you mustn't really! I shall be all right. It's your servant that I've been worrying about. He's still in those passages, perhaps a prisoner." She did not add, "Perhaps dead," although that was her fear.

"I must try to get to him. Did he have time to tell you anything?"

"Yes. He explained that you had suddenly disappeared; he was terribly worried because he had not heard anything from you."

"I wasn't able to send."

"Then yesterday morning he got my message sent to Eloise, as we had arranged. I didn't want to drag you into this." She could see Foyle smiling.

"I like the 'drag,'" he said. "Don't you know I wouldn't let anything stop me from seeing you?"

She realized then that, in coming to her that night, he must have risked his life, and she wanted to tell him to go away before he should be discovered.

"What was it in particular made you send, Sylvia?"

"Just tell me this first—are you connected with your uncle? In his work, I mean."

"Yes," replied Foyle, wondering why she had asked.

"That was what I thought. And that was why I sent. Peter, there are two Blessingtons here!"

"Two Blessingtons!. How on earth can—?"

"Hush! And, oh, don't you think you had better go now? If any one should see you!"

"I should shoot first!" he replied sternly. "But, Sylvia, this is amazing and vitally important! How do you know there are two Blessingtons?"

"I don't know for certain. What I mean by that is that I haven't actually seen both. But there is a dreadful man here who has a scar over his left eye. Mr. Blessington, the man I work for, tells me he is a friend of his, but I feel sure he must be a criminal. He has tried to——" She stopped, not wishing to distress him.

"I'll remember the gentleman!" snapped Foyle. "And it was this man——"

"Whom I heard threatening some one I could not see but whom he kept calling Blessington. It was in the passages beneath the house, the first night I went down there through the secret door. Just after, I saw the man I know as Blessington smoking a cigar and looking very pleased with himself. It could not have been he who was threatened."

"You mustn't take any more risks," whispered Foyle with passion. "My God, if anything happened to you now I should go mad! You must let me get you away from here at once—you can't stop here another minute!" His hand was upon the top bar outside the window.

She answered him so steadily that his admiration for the cool courage she was showing grew apace. "I must stay, Peter. There is something going on here which is very mysterious and which I don't understand. I want you to believe that I shall be safe from any harm, but if I left, suspicion would be aroused at once. I want to help you—I believe I can help you—but I can only help you by staying here. Yesterday I felt I should have to go; that was at first. Then I threatened to leave. But I said it only to test Blessington, and now I

know that it will be better for me to stay. I want you to have faith in me."

"Faith!" said Foyle tensely. "I love you. The first girl I have ever loved, dear!"

"I know." Leaning forward, she touched his lips with hers. "I believe I love you too, Peter," she said simply.

For a time there was silence. The wonder of life filled them both with a joy inexpressible.

Characteristically, the girl became practical first. "I do not think I shall have to stay here very long in any case," she said, "Mr. Blessington told me this morning that his plans were completed."

"Do you trust the chap?"

"I don't know. That is a silly answer, but it's the truth. I don't know. There is something about him which I find extraordinarily uncanny and mysterious, and yet he is always plausible. And he has treated me well—I must say that. It is the other man—Giolatti, I believe his name is—who——" She broke off, suddenly afraid for him because she fancied she heard footsteps coming along the passage that led to her room. "You must go, Peter!" she whispered. "If you should be found here!"

"I must try to get to Dommett," he replied. "I can't let the chap stay here. Where is that secret way out of the library, Sylvia?"

"No, no! You mustn't try that. I was foolish enough to tell Blessington about it this morning. He was very annoyed when I admitted I had been exploring the passages beneath the house. You can't go that way. He no doubt has the secret passage closed up. Besides, it would be difficult for you to find in the dark, and how could you get into the house?"

"I should find a way."

"You mustn't take the risk! There is something evil about this house. You might be killed. No! There is another way—did you notice those ruins to the right of the house?"

"I spent some time to-night having a look around them."

"I believe there is a way into the passage from there. In any case, the one which I found leading away from the library went straight to those ruins. Have you an electric torch?"

"Yes. I must go. Good-by, dear!"

"You will be very careful, Peter?"

He might have joked with any one else, but he did not with her. "I have a whole lot to live for now," Foyle said, and she found the answer satisfactory.

However, she put a hand over her heart to try to calm its tumultuous beating as the man she now knew she loved disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BLOW IN THE DARK.

THE swine! The beastly swine!" Dommsett said hoarsely to himself.

There was now an uncanny silence on the other side of the wall of his cell prison. The fiends who had been torturing that poor devil by the name of Blessington had evidently got what they wanted.

There was no more sleep for Dommsett. His own turn might be coming soon.

Fortunately for himself Dommsett was not of an introspective nature, but he had sufficient imagination to flinch from the ordeal which might be awaiting him. Well, he would lay one or two more of them out before they started any of their monkey tricks on him. To get out of that infernal cell! That was the problem which occupied his mind. Cutting out everything else, he concentrated on this chance.

However, a further study of his prison assured him that he might just as soon have tried to get out of a steel tank. The walls were of solid masonry, and the door was immovable.

Hours passed. How many he could

not have told; but the time seemed an eternity. Then quietly the door opened and two men entered.

The first was dressed as a butler. He carried a revolver. "Get back!" he cried, snarling, for Dommsett had instantly poised himself to spring.

"Put down the stuff, and wait by the door." The second man placed the food he had been carrying on the stone ledge built into the wall and took up a position behind the speaker.

"Now, you!" said March, addressing his prisoner. "The time has come for you to do a whole lot of explaining, and you'd better come through with the truth. What were you doing here last night?"

Dommsett growled like the bulldog he so closely resembled. Then, seeing that this only made the other more enraged, he decided that in his own interests it would be better to try to do some placating.

"What's your name, first?" was demanded.

"Brown!" replied Dommsett because that happened to be the first name that entered his head.

"Brown!" scoffed the other. "That was an easy one to think of."

"Well, what about it? Look 'ere, I think it's time I did a bit of this 'ere arskin' questions. What the 'ell do you mean by keepin' me in a rabbit hutch like this, eh?"

"Shut your trap!" he was warned. "If you don't want to be plugged, you'd better come through with the truth—what were you doing here last night?"

By this time Dommsett had thought of a story. It sounded plausible enough to him. "I'm down on me luck," he said. "trampin' about tryin' to get a job. Las' night I was dead beat—been sloshin' through the rain for hours. Lost me way, too, which made it all the worse. Well, just when I felt I couldn't go a step farther, I saw what I thought was a 'ouse. When I got to it, though,

'twere nothin' but a blarsted ruin. While I was gettin' ready to 'ave a doze, bang, I goes through the floor!

"Then, when I had come round," Dommett went on, "I fancied I 'eard a girl crying. I put it to you, mate—any man what *is* a man can't 'ear a girl cryin' without 'wantin' to do somethin' for her. So I up and runs down some passage place and sees her. 'Ow was I to know what was goin' on? I sees the girl struggling with some bloke and I lets out at 'im. If 'twas you I hit you can't blame me, can you? And now, while I'm thankful for the grub, I should take it as a favor, mate, if I can get out of this blarsted 'ole as soon as possible. This ain't a p'lice station, is it?" he asked innocently.

"No, my friend; it is not a police station. And I'm afraid that you're not likely to be let out of here for some time to come. Your yarn sounds all right, but how am I to know it's true?"

"How are you to know? Why, what the devil do you think I came here for, then? 'Ealth?"

"That remains to be proved." The speaker smiled in a manner that made Tom Dommett's fists itch. "And we have a method of proving things here."

It was probably the sidelong turn of the face toward the opposite wall that caused the ex-pugilist to grasp his meaning, and to lose all control over himself.

"Look 'ere, you cursed, rotten swine, don't you start threatenin' me with a dose of what you gave that fellow Blessington, whoever he may be, or I'll kill you with my bare hands, revolver or no revolver!"

Only a miracle saved Dommett's life that moment. March's eyes wandered around. Then they saw the grating high up in the wall on the left-hand side. He made a clicking sound with his tongue. He had forgotten that grating; that was how this man had heard. It was easy to understand.

"Hearing that will cost your life," March said savagely.

Dommett felt it was more than a mere threat; it was a statement of fact. As clearly as possible, he realized that because he had betrayed his knowledge, he would now never be allowed to leave the place alive. And because, realizing this, life became overwhelmingly sweet and full of a fine and splendid savor to him, he fought both himself and his hate.

"Not that the bloke Blessington, whoever 'e is, is anythin' to me, you understand, mate," Dommett said.

The man holding the revolver gave no reply. Instead, he laughed, and, brave soul as Tom Dommett was, the sound of that laugh made his hair bristle. Backing slowly to the door, with the revolver always menacing, the jailers then departed.

It took Dommett many hours to think of a plan; but when the idea came to him he wondered why it had not struck him before. He would be given some supper, he supposed, just as he had been given breakfast and dinner; kind of them, that was, to be sure! However, he didn't care for the notion of being kept strong so that they could enjoy torturing him all the more.

There was just one chance. When he heard the key grating in the lock, Dommett took up a position near the wall toward which he knew the door, when it was opened, would swing. Both fists were clenched.

"Where is he?" snarled the man who came first. Then like a cat, he swung around.

He was too late. With one arm Dommett knocked the revolver on one side so that when the pressure on the trigger came the bullet spurned itself into the wall; with the other hand he rattled home the finest knockout blow to the jaw he ever had achieved.

The man went down without a sound, but the shot had raised a pandemonium

in those underground caverns. Men could be heard running.

Dommett stooped and plucked the revolver from the hand which was now too nerveless to retain a hold, and, as the men came tearing down upon him—he was outside the cell by this time, standing in the corridor—he pumped as many bullets into them as the chambers contained. Then, and only then, he took to his heels.

“Revolver shots!” Peter Foyle told himself as he crouched in the shadows. A minute before he had been feeling about as fed-up as he believed any living person could feel. It was only after risking his neck a dozen times that he found himself in this bewildering labyrinth of dank-smelling corridors, and how to find Tom Dommett, even if he were still there, which seemed unlikely, was a job that he felt was absolutely beyond him. And then, in the darkness ahead, came the sudden spluttering of a revolver fired five times.

Foyle pushed forward, trusting to be in at the end. Afraid to use his torch, he had switched off the light.

Suddenly, like one insane, a man came tearing out of the gloom straight at him. By his run, and the low words which were streaming from his lips, Foyle guessed the fugitive to be Dommett.

“Dommett!” he cried softly, but the man’s great fist came whirling around. He had not heard his name uttered and thought the blurred shape before him must be another enemy.

Stars danced before Lulu Foyle’s eyes. Vainly he tried to save himself; but the blow had been merciless. He dived into an oblivion that seemed miles deep.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SEEDS OF SUSPICION.

AT the moment that Foyle was knocked out by the very hand which would have done most for him in the world, a man and a woman were seated

in a luxuriously furnished flat in the heart of London’s West End. The man was immaculately dressed, immaculately mannered. His clothes had been fashioned by the greatest tailor in London, and his manners had come down to him from a family that had been famous for the courtliness of its men for centuries. Count Lasch, the last of an evil but illustrious line, had turned crook without having any foolish moral scruples; the European war had seen the last of the once-fabulous Lasch fortune disappear into the melting pot—and he had to have money.

He looked at the woman, whom many had declared to be the most superb creature they had ever seen, and sighed. This man with the wolf’s mouth sighed!

“Nadia, why do you smile when I say I love you?” he asked.

His companion blew a cloud of smoke from a pair of gloriously tempting lips. “You are an artist in so many things, count”—she smiled sardonically—“and an artist is never supposed to repeat himself!” There was an empty indifference in her tone; one would have said that the speaker was politely but insufferably bored.

Yet few women could have looked upon this man without having their pulses stirred. Straight and lean as any sports-playing Englishman, he retained his ancient pride of race; even though he was a crook, he was an eagle among crooks. Only one man could claim mastery over him, and that man was more devil than human.

Now, although the words of cool contempt must have stung him to the quick, only his eyes showed how deeply he was moved. For the rest he was as easy mannered as before. “Repetition is tiresome, I agree, Nadia,” he rejoined; “but there is one subject in which a man may repeat himself and be forgiven. It is love.”

“Love!” The glorious lips softly uttered the word. “But I know nothing

about love, *mon ami*. To me it is the most tiresome subject in the world."

"That's where you lie, Nadia! I do not say intentionally; but if ever a woman was made for love you are she! You know it! You cannot deny it. You are the most wonderful woman in the world! Shall I tell you something, Nadia?" The man spoke with great emotion.

"I can guess what you are going to say, count." She actually yawned, showing teeth as white as pearls, and the tip of a tongue, blood red.

Still he retained his temper. "I, perhaps better than any other man in the world, Nadia, can show you how wonderful love can be! You are the only woman I have ever seen that I would wish to marry. I ask you now!"

She yawned again. "Really, count, you are becoming hopelessly bourgeois! Marriage! You would not marry a tiger cat?" She had risen, eyes flaming. In an instant she had changed so completely that she did not seem the same woman.

"That is what I adore in you, Nadia—the tiger cat. The passion you have—that is what I love!"

"Fool! You do not understand!" She stamped her foot fiercely. "Faugh! How you sicken me! I hate you! I hate all men! For it was a man who made me what I am to-day."

"A superlatively bewitching woman!"

Count Lasch dared to say so much, but she disregarded the words as though she had not heard them.

"I will tell you my story," she said, and because his courtliness was innate and natural, Count Lasch placed a chair. "My father was a Russian nobleman. His name does not matter. It was famous. He was a friend of the czar. That was when I was young—young." She repeated the word as though it brought merciless memories to her. "Then came the revolution. You, in Hungary, count, knew something of

what happens when a mob takes absolute control, but what you knew was nothing, nothing, to what happened in Russia—in Moscow." She paused, unmentionable horrors rising up before her.

When she continued, her voice had hardened and had the ring of steel in it. "Yet it was not from the mob that I suffered most. A nobleman, a friend of my father's, an admirer of my mother's, God's curses on him! He betrayed us all; secretly he had been working against all his old friends for some time. He turned traitor against his own class, against his own blood; he turned like a foul rat to bite us.

"And now I will tell you why the words 'love' and 'passion' sicken me," Nadia went on. "For his reward Baron Ivorstroon was given me! I was only a young girl then, just seventeen, a girl on the threshold of life that I thought was clean and sweet. I have scars on my back where he used to whip me," she said in a voice gone dead and dull. "Count Lasch, you, with your polish, your finished manners, your cultured sophistication, your damnable courtliness, false eyes and cruel mouth, you remind me of the man I killed one night by stabbing him in the heart while his lips clung to mine! That is why, if you talk to me of love again, I will shoot you!"

The man had gone white before this terrible and unexpected attack; but nothing could disturb that nonchalant poise which was his heritage from the most polished ancestry of Central Europe. "I am sorry, Nadia," he said, and from his tone one would have judged that he was sincere. "I had no idea."

"That was why, when I fled across the frontier from Russia, I became what I am to-day—a crook, a criminal. The beauty which had been my ruin I devoted to the ruin of others. For, you see, my friend, the devil had taken my soul and squeezed all the goodness out

of it—all the faith, the sweetness, and the joy I once had in life.

"It amuses me now sometimes to see men come with a light in their eyes to pay homage to that which I consider to be vile," Nadia continued. "Men have taken their lives without so much as kissing my lips; no living man will ever do even as much as that. For inside I am dead—dead!"

"One day, Nadia, a man will bring you to life again," said Count Lasch. "I regret the honor will not fall to me. But"—changing his tone as quickly as an actor—"since the subject is painful to you we will change it." He lighted a cigarette. "I think we made a mistake in regard to that fellow Jerningham."

"A mistake! What do you mean?" Nadia's voice had lost its hardness.

"Of course, he may have an excellent excuse, but, on the other hand, his conduct this afternoon was highly suspicious. Naturally he had been under surveillance. Well, this afternoon he turned on Whitfield who was trailing him, and knocked him out. Then he took to his heels and vanished. He was to have reported here to-night, but he has not come."

"It is early yet. No doubt Jerningham will have his answer. I have every faith in him myself."

"You would, Nadia!" A faint, almost imperceptible sneer edged the words.

She stood up, facing him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only that the best of women are apt to be illogical, Nadia—to say one thing and to act another." His mouth looked cruel now.

"You are very mysterious to-night."

"Then I will endeavor to be more lucid. I think that you, Nadia, the hater of all men—or so you claim—are dangerously near falling in love with this fellow who I shouldn't be surprised to find is a secret agent of the police! What do you say to that?"

"That you are a fool, my friend! But assuming for a moment that your statement is correct, what business is it of yours, Count Lasch?"

"None at all!" he answered with elaborate politeness; "but if my presumptions are correct, you will find it will be very much the business of No. 1. And then, God help Jerningham!"

"And God help you, Count Lasch—and even No. 1—if Jerningham is hurt!" The girl flung out the words as a hot challenge.

"You have come to life, as I prophesied you would!" Lasch exclaimed in a mocking tone.

While Count Lasch was bowing his visitor out, a man was putting as great a distance as possible between him and the house of mystery from which he had escaped. It was a tribute to his adversaries that Tom Dommett's nerve was shaken. After that nightmare escape from the labyrinth beneath Dipper's-dyke he had been afraid almost to look over his shoulder. This was not physical fear for himself, but he realized that a very great deal depended upon his getting back to London in safety.

It was night when he accomplished this feat. Afraid to go to the flat, he decided to run no more chances, and to tell all he knew to Sir Herbert Mandeville, who was not only Peter Foyle's uncle but a man with almost unlimited power.

Sir Herbert lived in Clarges Square, and Dommett reached that noble residential quarter without mishap. It being the hour for dinner the square was practically deserted. The ex-pugilist gulped with relief when his destination came in sight.

He had put one foot on the steps leading up to the house when men seemed to spring out of the ground. One dived at his ankles, and, as he came crashing down, a pad saturated with something that smelled of sweets and

bitter almonds was thrust over his nose and mouth. Dommett tried to use his arms, but these had been seized. Within an incredibly short time all resistance went from him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BEHIND THE SCREEN.

AS soon as Foyle had left her, all Sylvia's courage went, for she felt that she had been instrumental in sending the man she loved to his death.

That despondent mood fortunately did not last very long. Faith in Foyle shattered it. He would win through somehow. And, of course, he was bound to go to the rescue of his servant.

She was thankful she had been able to allay Foyle's suspicions in regard to herself. Had she told him of her fear, he would have broken into the house and tried to get to her side. And that would have ended everything. He would have been taken for a spy, and she shivered to think what might happen to a spy in those underground passages.

Was Blessington, her employer, what he professed to be? If so, who was the other man named Blessington? Why should he be kept a prisoner and threatened?

She could not solve the puzzle; but the word "puzzle" coming into her mind, she sat upright. There were those countless letters she typed for Blessington. Why should a busy inventor have so many correspondents? What did those letters, couched in cipher most of them, really contain? She resolved to find out.

The more she considered the subject, the more she became impressed with the importance of what she might discover. Blessington had never troubled to explain to her the reason why he had so many correspondents in all parts of the world; but then, of course, there

was no reason why he should explain. She was paid to work, not to receive information.

Up till the present Sylvia never had troubled to think about the letters which were sent off in such huge quantities; but now she thrilled at the anticipation of setting her brains to work on the solution. She had got from her father a taste for trying to solve anything cryptographic. Mr. Fowke's services, she remembered, had been requisitioned during the war by the government. Many highly interesting problems in cipher had been solved by the obscure country parson, whose hobby unexpectedly became of the greatest value to his country.

She had not been able to help her father to any appreciable extent in this work; but she had caught something of his enthusiasm in the quest, and, what was more, she remembered some of the main principles on which he worked. Everything, he had once told her, consisted in finding the cipher solutions for, first, the letter "E," and then the word "The." The rest often became comparatively easy, after that.

She was so anxious to begin, that she felt tempted to go down to the library straight away. Her time would be short—hadn't Blessington said that he had completed his invention and that her stay at Dipper's-dyke consequently need not be long?

At breakfast the next morning her employer was brusque and moody. Something seemed to have upset him. "I shall not require you this morning," he said curtly. He paused at the door. "And I find it necessary to warn you that if you venture out of the house I will not be responsible for your safety. Please understand that."

Sylvia made no reply. Threats from this man no longer had the power to move her. Her interest was too absorbed in the task she had set herself. Once in the library, she placed the

screen around her desk and started to work. If any one came in, it would seem that Sylvia was merely pursuing her ordinary duties.

She sat absorbed in her task until luncheon; but the only reward she had gained by this time was a splitting headache due to the concentration put into the work. So far as any practical solution was concerned Sylvia was as far off her object as before she started.

Rising in answer to the luncheon bell, she saw March, the butler, standing in the doorway. He had a tray of food in his hands.

"You are to have your meal here," she was told.

"Very well, March." Then, noticing the look in the man's face, she said: "You have been made responsible for me, I suppose?"

"Yes; I'll see that you don't slip away, my beauty!"

"Put down the tray and leave me!" It was useless to waste her breath threatening to report the man to Blessington. March, as she had long suspected, stood in a nearer relationship to her employer than merely a servant.

"I'm warning you that it won't be worth your while to play any more tricks." With this remark the scowling butler slammed the door behind him.

Sylvia was puzzled with herself; instead of being depressed, she was in a measure elated. For she felt now that she knew definitely where she was—March had torn the last shred of illusion away from her eyes.

She was in the midst of enemies—men who were ruthless—but she had a chance of beating them. If only that cipher used in Blessington's correspondence could be solved!

While eating her lunch, she pondered on March's remark: "I'll see that you don't slip away, my beauty!" The man had emphasized the word "you."

That seemed to mean that some one else had got away. Was it Dommett

or Foyle? Or both? Perhaps both! She went back to her self-appointed task with a glad heart.

No one came to disturb her, and she worked on and on. The clock had just struck seven when Sylvia flung up her hands with a short cry of joy. She had discovered the beginning of the solution.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out April 1st. It began in the February 15th issue.

Next

BARBER: "You are getting quite bald, sir. Will you allow me to recommend something for your head?"

Mr. Hurry: "Why, yes; I'd like my hat as soon as possible."

Not Nice of Alice

IS it true that you proposed to Alice and that she rejected you?"

"Not exactly rejected. She said that when she felt like making a fool of herself she'd let me know."

Very Catty

MR.S. HILL: "Does your husband object to cats?"

Mrs. Mill: "Yes, indeed. He says I feed all the cats in the neighborhood. Won't you stay and have tea?"

The Wrong Word

YES, she *is* inquisitive. She seems to ask question after question just out of idle curiosity."

"Oh, no—her curiosity is never idle."

Careless Language

IS it true, darling, that you gave the minister twenty-five dollars for marrying us?"

"Yes, but keep it to yourself. I was never so swindled in my life."

Tale of a Western Bandit:
The Goat of Mail ~

By
Miles Overholt



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

THE BANDIT GETS A LETTER.



IT'S easy enough to gentle a post card, but a postage stamp has to be licked!" "Egg-face" Hanchett grinned to himself as he thought that one up all out of his own head. Egg-face then began humming a merry lay as he slit the mail pouch open with his keen, long-bladed knife and proceeded to sort out the letters. Some of them carried real money in them.

Hidden from view in a cavern of rock high up on Salta Verda Mesa, the stage robber painstakingly examined each letter and package to make certain that he was overlooking nothing. Many a purely private epistle was opened and, oftentimes, read. For Egg-face enjoyed prying into other persons' affairs.

The haul was not as complete as Hanchett had anticipated. He had been led to believe that the Bear Mountain Mining Company's pay roll would be on the stage, but it was a false report—possibly circulated for the purpose of throwing robbers off the track. Which was a dirty trick, according to Egg-face.

However, there was quite a good deal of registered mail, and that helped. He had stuffed his pockets full of currency, probably a couple of thousand dollars in all, and was just beginning to skim the dregs, when he suddenly started aback with an exclamation.

For there before his eyes was a letter addressed to him.

At least it was meant for him, for the envelope fairly shouted: "To the Bold, Bad Man Who Robs This Mail."

That was an odd one. In all his career as a stage robber, this was the first time he ever had found a letter that became so personal right at the beginning.

For Hanchett had robbed many mail stages in all parts of the West. Indeed this was the third time he had held up and robbed the Bear Mountain Circle City mail flivver. This was partly due to the remoteness of the region which made stage robbing merely a pastime, and because of the fact that there was a reward of five thousand dollars for his capture—and Egg-face delighted in defying the sheriff. That was sport.

At the first robbery Hanchett had found it necessary to shoot and kill the

driver, Abe Phillips, after which he had left the country for a year so that the excitement might blow over. That was when the reward was offered.

He returned three months later and took the mail sack from the new driver, Henry Peltarp. That time he got away with about five hundred dollars—only chicken feed. He spent it in a week at Reno. That was the time he met Idora.

Idora Foster, she said her name was, and that she was at Reno for the purpose of annexing a divorce to herself.

Egg-face let her believe for a long time that he was a wealthy mine owner, and they got along first rate. It was not until a month later that he confided to the red-haired woman that he frequently added to his exchequer by the persuasive method of extraction by holding a blue barrel of steel firmly in the right hand.

That, however, was only after Idora had confessed several things to him, and he knew that she could be trusted. Anyway, they were to be married and go to South America to live just as soon as Egg-face had cleaned up.

That was the motive that spurred Hanchett on to tackle the Bear Mountain stage so soon again. He needed the money for Idora, and he faced the five-thousand-dollar-reward thing unflinchingly.

And because the third robbery was unexpected at this time, the sheriff was in another part of the big county. And, by the time he could get to Bear Mountain and go over the ground, the bandit would, of course, be hundreds of miles away.

The driver telephoned to the county seat as soon as he could reach a station on four flat tires, shot full of holes by the bandit, which was all that could be done. There were not half a dozen men within sixty miles. For the stage was held up at Coyote Wells, midway between Bear Mountain and Circle City.

Hanchett, of course, knew this. So he took his time enjoying the unusual

pastime of reading the letters that appealed to him and of destroying the tender missives to relatives, friends, and sweethearts.

And then he found the letter addressed to him.

Gingerly he picked it up, weighing it carefully in his hand, pondering, wondering what it might contain.

At last he opened it. Then he read:

DEAR MR. BOLD, BAD BANDIT: This stage has been robbed so often that I am sure the same man must be taking liberties with the mail. I hope, however, that he doesn't disturb mine. Except, of course, this letter! If you make a clean-up this time, Mr. Robber, why not reform and start in on a Monday and try to be good for a whole week? Then, when the next urge comes, stop and think deeply before you are wholly lost. Because, you know, Mr. Bandit, it doesn't pay. But I do so admire a bold, bad bandit. Or at least I could—if he reformed! Remember, Mr. Bandit, there are a great many lanes going wrong, but only one right road. Watch for every crossing, and keep to the right one. Sincerely,

GERTRUDE HOLT,

Bear Mountain P. O., Nevada.

Please write to me and tell me that you are going to reform. I am only a romantic little girl away up here in the mountains, but I would love to hear from you—honestly.

P. S. I'm defying one robber, anyway!

"Huh!" grunted Hanchett. Then he sang softly: "How dear to my heart is the old hokum bucket." He looked off into space and grinned. "It's a new one, all right, but I've cut my eye teeth," he said to himself. "Expecting me to fall for that! Huh!"

He looked at the signature again, re-read the letter more carefully. Then a brand-new light came into his eyes. "Oh, I dunno," he mused. "Mebbe I'll call and see Gertrude, after all. I'll bet she is lonesome away up there in the hills. Poor little kid!"

Egg-face had not been in communication with Idora for two months. A harmless little flirtation on the side, eh? Well, why not?

Caution told him to destroy the let-

ter; sentiment begged him to keep it. He obeyed sentiment and placed it in an inside coat pocket. Then he chucked the slashed mail pouches and the pile of torn letters into a crevice in the rock, made his way down the hill to his horse, mounted, and rode down into a sheltered coulee.

CHAPTER II.

NO TIME TO FLIRT.

HANCHETT had not observed the postmark on the letter carrying the date. It made but little difference anyway. Still if he had known that the letter had lain in the Circle City post office for three days, that the postmaster there had opened it and had made a copy of it, which he had sent on to the inspectors at Carson, he might not have felt quite so pleased with himself.

"Now, who's trying to get a warning to the feller that's been robbing the mail, I wonder," Postmaster Gabett of Circle City said to his assistant, as the letter addressed to the bandit fell face upward from the sack nearly a week before.

"Why, what's the dope?" asked Joe Miller, coming closer.

"I reckon it's my duty to open it and see," observed Gabett. "See if the instructions say anything about such a contingency, Joe."

Joe couldn't find a word about it. So the postmaster opened Gertrude Holt's letter, read it, copied it, and sent the copy on to his chief.

With it he inclosed a letter of his own, which said:

Gertrude Holt is the eldest daughter of Jake Holt, postmaster at Bear Mountain. I guess she is just what she says she is—a romantic kid. Please advise me what to do with her letter.

By return mail Gabett received a reply:

Evidently the Holt girl is trying to secure that reward. She is, apparently, pretty

smooth, and I would leave the letter in the pouch. You never can tell—perhaps the robber will tackle it again and "fall for" the girl's letter. I shall take a run up to Bear Mountain in a few days and interview Gertrude. Looks to me as though she is a first-class detective in the making. By all means, keep the letter traveling back and forward for a while.

"Shucks! that kid ain't got sense enough to be trying to trap no robber," said Joe Miller, Gabett's assistant, after reading the inspector's answer. "I've knowed her ever since she was a baby. She's just what she says she is—romantic and stuck on any kind of a man."

"Well, the big boss says to let her go, so here goes." And the postmaster chucked the letter into the Bear Mountain mail sack.

And that is why Egg-face Hanchett happened to find the letter in the sack marked "Bear Mountain."

Jerome Jarvis, inspector for the Circle City district, dropped into the Circle City post office a week later. "Well," he said, addressing himself to Postmaster Gabett, "I see your bandit received his mail."

"Yeh; you mean that Holt gal's letter? Sure, I put it in the sack that morning, myself. I reckon he got it, all right."

"I'm going up to Bear Mountain to have a talk with Gertrude," went on the inspector. "Seems to me she ought to be encouraged."

"Yeh, if she knows what she's doing," responded Gabett. "Personally, I don't believe she's got sense enough to think up anything like that—even to writing just for the fun of it."

"But you must concede that she wrote it, anyway. She must have had a reason," argued the inspector.

"Yeh; mebbe," said Gabett. "I think she's just a fool kid with a lot of crazy notions about men."

"Well, we'll see!" The inspector smiled. "Women make very clever detectives. They have imagination."

"Mebbe," said Gabett.

His interview with Gertrude Holt, however, was not as satisfactory as he had anticipated.

He met the girl the following evening at the Bear Mountain post office. She was alone, as her father was employed at the mine, two miles up the mountain, on the night shift.

"I called to congratulate you on your cleverness," the inspector said to the girl when the last patron of the post office had left. "Keep it up, and you'll land somewhere with the department."

"Oh, do you like the way I keep the post office?" wondered the girl, blushing.

"Well, that wasn't exactly what I meant," said the inspector. "I refer to that letter you wrote to the robber who held up the stage the other day."

The girl gasped, grew white, then red, her eyes wide. "Oh, why, did you—I—didn't know—how did you know?" she managed to ask haltingly.

"It was my business to know." The inspector smiled, taking all the credit. "Letters like yours don't go through the mails every day," he continued. "I imagine yours was about the first ever attempted."

"Oh!" breathed the girl.

"Pretty clever, too," he said. "Let's see—you're not more than eighteen or nineteen years old, are you?"

"Seventeen," she replied.

"Hm! And you thought of a way to trap the robber all by yourself!"

"To trap him?"

"Yes. Of course, you hoped he would answer your letter—perhaps call to see you—and then you would notify the officers—"

"Why, no—I—I—of course not!"

"What! You didn't write that letter for the purpose of enticing the bandit—so you could collect the reward!" It was the inspector's turn to become nearly incoherent.

"Why, no! I just wrote for fun.

That's all. I thought maybe he would reform—"

"Hm! I see," grunted the inspector, looking quizzically at the girl. "I guess Gabett was right," he said, half aloud.

Over in a corner was a dusty typewriter.

"You wrote it on this machine, eh?" asked the inspector, indicating the wreck.

"Yes, sir. I always use a typewriter for my correspondence."

"Hm! You haven't heard from the bandit yet, have you? Jarvis' eyes were narrow now, his smile grim.

"No, sir. I didn't think I would."

He believed her. She couldn't have lied without blushing, he figured.

"Well, the minute you do hear from him—if you do—I want you to telephone the Circle City post office immediately. Understand—immediately!"

"Yes, sir," said the girl, cringing.

"How did you happen to think of writing to the robber, anyway?" Jarvis' tone was more kindly now, and the girl began to regain her composure.

"Why, we were talking about—men—and—"

"Who was talking about men?"

"Miss French and I—she's our boarder. She teaches the children of the mine workers, you know."

"Oh! yes?"

"Well, we got to talking, and she said it would be fun to write to a stranger, only she didn't know any names. I tried to think of some, and then she asked why not write to the man that has been robbing the Bear Mountain mail, and that is all there was to it."

"Why didn't she write the letter?"

"Oh, she has a sweetheart, she says, and I haven't. Besides, she said she wouldn't dare, being a teacher and all."

"And who composed the letter—you?"

"Oh, both of us, I guess. It was a kind of a hard letter to write."

"I see," said the inspector. "Well, I must be going. Don't forget to telephone us the minute you hear from your robber." He shook her hand cordially and left.

Ten minutes after he had started his car and had headed toward Circle City, another stranger appeared at the door of the post office. He entered quietly and walked up to the delivery window. Gertrude Holt stepped forward.

"Good evening!" said the good-looking young man. "Is there any mail for Jepson—William Jepson?"

The girl looked through the "J" box. "No," she answered. "Are you at the mine?"

"Yes, he replied. "Just went to work to-day. Nice evening, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the girl, blushing. This young man seemed to be taking a personal interest in her. He was different from the usual run of miners, and she was pleased.

"I wonder where I could get a place to board," he went on. "I don't like the mine boarding house. Do you happen to know of a place?"

"No—that is—I'm not sure. We—my mother might take in another boarder. I could ask her."

"That would be mighty kind of you!" The stranger smiled. "Does she have boarders already?"

"Only one—the school-teacher—Miss French."

"Oh, yes; I wonder if I haven't met her—smallish, red-haired girl, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, I surely will appreciate it if you will find out for me. I'll drop around here to-morrow evening at about this time, eh?"

"Why, yes; I could let you know then," said the girl.

"That'll be fine. Good evening!" The young man smiled. He carelessly thrust a letter into the opening marked "Letters" and went out.

Then he nonchalantly made his way down the road to the bridge below the lone post office, found his horse tied there in the bushes, mounted, and rode in the direction of Circle City, but off the main highway.

"So that's Gertrude Holt," he mused as he rode along. "Nice-looking gal, at that. But, after all, I'm afraid I can't avail myself of the opportunity to stop and flirt with her. This is already Saturday night. This bandit business certainly cramps the style."

CHAPTER III.

QUITE UNEXPECTED.

THE next day was Sunday and Egg-face Hanchett spent it lying on his face with his eyes glued to the Circle City stage road. He was perched high above the roadway and had a commanding view of the road for twenty miles either direction. Bareheaded, he gathered even more freckles, if that were possible, than he already had, but he never relaxed his vigil.

Hanchett was playing a hunch. He had a vague premonition that during the day a sheriff's posse would come cantering along that road, and he wanted to see if his guess was correct.

Ten miles to the southwest was Lane's Crossing, a gulch of much depth, dry now, but in the springtime a raging river. That was the spot upon which his eyes rested most.

For there it was that he intended to stage another holdup on the morrow—less than a week after his latest similar feat.

This, he hoped, would be his last robbery. If his information was correct, and he had spent time and braved many dangers verifying the report, he would make a haul this time sufficient to take him and Idora out of the country.

Up to noon no one had appeared on the horizon. At one o'clock he saw a small cloud of dust near Lane's Cross-

ing. It came nearer. There was no doubt about the cause. A lone man in a small automobile was coming toward Bear Mountain. Oh, well, if there was only one!

Hanchett adjusted his field glasses and trained them on the man in the automobile. He gazed at the man for half an hour. Then he muttered: "One of the rich mine guys, I reckon. Nothing to worry about, anyway."

At dusk no one else had traversed the wide-open road. Hanchett arose, sought his horse, fed and watered him, ate a cold lunch of canned goods, rolled up in his saddle blankets and went to sleep.

Long before daylight, however, he was mounted and riding briskly over the hills toward Lane's Crossing.

By sunup he was safely ensconced in the deep gulch, his horse hidden behind a sudden turn in the embankment. Here he again took a nap of a couple of hours, for he expected to do some hard night riding before he would dare sleep again.

The stage from Bear Mountain to Circle City does not leave the mountain post office till two o'clock in the afternoon. Hanchett had plenty of time to prepare his reception.

Though he wanted badly to smoke, he restrained himself, for even that might attract attention, he feared.

At ten minutes after two he saddled and bridled his powerful horse, buried all signs of his camp, adjusted his mask, saw that his revolver was in working order, and moved calmly down to the road.

There he dragged a water-logged tree to the middle of the gulch and directly in the path of any vehicle.

Cautiously, then, he raised his head above the embankment and looked up the road toward Bear Mountain.

Coming along at fifteen or twenty miles an hour, Henry Peltarp drove his flivver, looking neither to the right nor

left, apparently all unconscious of any danger ahead. Beside him sat a man, a rifle between his knees. In ten minutes the stage would descend the gulch.

Egg-face dropped down and crouched against the side of the gulch, exulting. The guard meant that there was a shipment of gold aboard. His information had been correct.

The stage slowed down as the driver saw the log in the middle of the road at the bottom of the gulch. The guard flung his rifle to his shoulder.

"Stick 'em up! You're covered!"

The order, snapped out almost at the guard's ear, caused him immediately to drop his rifle, which went clattering to the road. Peltarp jammed on the emergency brake.

Then there was the report of a rifle, and the robber's gun was hurled from his hand.

Hanchett half turned, wavered. For he heard another order addressed to him, and he could do nothing else but obey.

"Put up your hands, you bandit person! Four guns are pointing at your white liver. Higher, or we'll bore you!"

Hanchett's hands stretched higher.

Four men, Jerome Jarvis in the lead, came from behind a turn in the gulch below the road where they had been camped ever since midnight—fourteen hours of waiting.

Quickly the robber was handcuffed. Snarling, he was placed in the back seat of the flivver. Then with three men on horses guarding him from side and rear, and with the guard in the front seat, Henry Peltarp, grinning, started the stage on toward Circle City with the prisoner.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW IT WAS DONE.

IT was not until Monday morning when she began preparing the outgoing mail that Gertrude Holt found a letter addressed to her.

It was a drop letter, and she gave little heed to it until after the other mail had been placed in the pouch. Then she took up her own letter and opened it. Breathing heavily, she blushing read:

DEAR GERTRUDE:

Well, after such a nice letter, I can do nothing else than reform. A job like that will be easy now. You have helped lots. I'd love to meet you in person. That is, if you think that you would like to meet me. When I become good, honest, and industrious, and working hard every day at some honest occupation, I will write you again. Somewhere, perhaps east of Reno, I'll go to work. Who knows? You may be sure I shall hurry and reform for good.

Yours truly,
THE ROBBER.

Gertrude's first thought was to telephone to Circle City. But, after reading the letter again, she saw no need for haste. The robber had furnished no information that would benefit the post-office department. Besides, she wanted to show the letter to Miss French.

By the time Miss French had returned to her boarding house from the mine school, Gertrude had learned the robber's letter by heart.

As soon as she saw Miss French coming down the hill toward the house, she closed the post office and went to meet her.

"I've got a pleasant surprise for you," she said gayly. "Look—a letter from the bandit man."

"Fine!" The teacher smiled. "Another romance on the way. Is it too personal yet for me to read?"

"Certainly not! Half of it is yours, anyway," said Gertrude.

They sat on the porch of the tiny post office. Miss French read the letter twice, three times. Then she quietly handed it back.

"That's fine!" she said, a far-away look in her eyes. "By the way, I may leave here soon. I received a—er—telephone message to-day from Carson—my mother is ill."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

Gertrude Holt arose. A man was coming briskly along the path from her home. She looked at him again. Then she recognized him. It was the post-

office inspector who had called upon her a few days before.

"Hello, little one!" he called genially. "I was just over to your house looking for you."

"Good evening!" said Gertrude. "May I introduce my friend, Miss French?"

"Oh, hello—Idora!" said Jarvis. "Hold out your little hands. I have a pair of nice, pretty bracelets for you."

Though the teacher arose, started back, ready to flee, she was grasped and handcuffed before she knew it. Jarvis was no slouch with the women.

Gertrude Holt gasped in amazement, too dumfounded to utter a word.

Jarvis turned to Miss Holt. "I see you have a letter. May I read it?"

Without a word Gertrude handed it over.

He read it, grinned. "Not so bad—for a robber! Not so bad!" he muttered.

He seated Idora on the porch and sat down beside her.

"Pretty smooth kid, Idora! Pretty smooth! Getting an innocent girl like Gertrude, here, to act as your clearing house—a goat. Sort of a goat of mail, eh?" He laughed happily at his joke.

"Lemme show you something, Gertrude," he said, pulling the girl down beside him. He took the copy of Gertrude's letter to the robber from his pocket.

"Read it again, slowly. Notice the

words I have underscored? Observe that the second word in the first line, the third in the second line, the fourth in the third line, and so, are the code words."

Gertrude reread her own letter. It was far from the innocent, romantic

epistle she thought she had written. For with the underscored words, standing out now, it seemed to her, the robber had been informed in plain, unvarnished English of the shipment from the Bear Mountain mine.

The letter now appeared this way:

This *stage* has been robbed so often that I am sure the same man must be *taking* liberties with the mail. I hope, however, that he doesn't disturb *mine*. Except of course, this letter! If you make a *clean-up* this time, Mr. Robber, why not reform and start in on a *Monday* and try to be good for a whole week? Then when the next urge comes, *stop* and think deeply before you are wholly lost. Because, you know, Mr. Bandit, *it* doesn't pay. But I do so admire a bold, bad bandit. Or *at least* I could—if he reformed! Remember, Mr. Bandit, there are a great many *lanes* going wrong, but only one right road. Watch for every *crossing*, and keep to the right one.

She finished reading and turned her eyes toward Jarvis, who was smiling.

"Now, notice your postscript," he said gently.

She read:

I'm Defying One Robber, Anyway.

"The initial letters combined spell 'Idora,' see? Pretty cute, I call it," went on the inspector.

He gazed at the silent, sullen woman at his side. "I never took much stock in that French thing—'look for the woman.' But it begins to look to me as though I've been overlooking a bet. Idora, you're good. It was the very boldness of the darn thing that fooled us. I got to hand it to you. Let's see your letter now, Gertrude."

She returned it to him.

"Yep; same code thing," he said in a moment. He underscored the words as he did in the girl's letter—second in

the first line, third in the second line, and so on. The message that it conveyed was:

After Job Meet Me At Reno. Hurry.

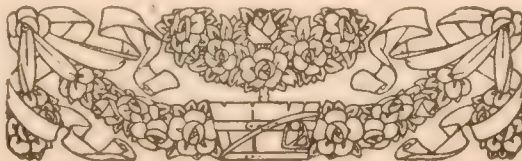
"You see, they were both using you, kiddie," Jarvis told Gertrude. "But we got Hanchett at two o'clock. He's on his way to Carson now. And we have Idora. So everything's all right. But—don't do it again. There are quite a number of slickers in the world, here and there."

He arose and wiped his brow. "Come on, Idora! The car's waiting," he said.

He half supported the near-fainting Idora down the path to the road. At the car he called back to Gertrude:

"So long, Gertie! Don't forget now—don't be a goat of mail for anybody."

And Gertrude, weeping softly, tore the two letters into shreds.



Put to the Test

By Charles F. Davis.



TWO brothers, the last of the ancient house of Dombra, stood in one of the front rooms of that old stone castle.

The one a soldier; the other just finished his schooling. Fine upright men they were, with strong, beautiful features; fearless and worthy to bear the name of that famous old family.

"To-night, my brother, is the carnival. Let us drink a toast to the beautiful Doña Maria."

The elder brother of the house of Dombra filled the two thin-stemmed glasses from the cut-glass decanter on the table, a table of heavy black walnut, hand carved two hundred and fifty years before, and matching the rest of the heavy furniture in that large, dreary room.

"The beautiful Doña Maria will marry into the house of Dombra, and to-night, my brother, she will make the choice."

The two brothers lifted their glasses to pay a salute to the health of the beautiful señorita.

"Pardon," interrupted a servant from the open door, "it is the chief of the local police calling."

"You will pardon me for a moment,

my brother?" said the elder as he set his glass back on the table.

"Most certainly!" replied the younger brother.

Then when he was alone, the younger brother of the house of Dombra looked furtively after his brother and around the room, and drawing a small paper packet from his sash he opened it and with nervous fingers spilled the contents into one of the glasses.

"I know whom the señorita will choose," he mused aloud; "it is my brother she has already chosen." And he wondered if the poison would act fast or slow, or if it would be painful.

"It will be simple," he thought. "When he cries out and falls to the floor I will place the paper container in his sash and then run and call the servants. It will be suicide, and no one will ever suspect."

He looked at the two glasses, and for a moment his hand went out toward them as though he regretted his plan, and then he drew back again.

"No; it must be!" he said aloud. "It is the glass with the smaller amount."

He must watch close and remember, for Fate sometimes played strange tricks with memories.

"My brother," said the elder from the open door, and the younger brother started suddenly back and then recovered himself. "It is only the chief of the local police," continued the elder brother, "and he is here about the horse that was stolen from our field. You had a glimpse of the thief, and will you not describe him to the chief?"

The younger brother begged leave of the elder and crossed to the opposite room where the caller awaited.

The elder brother walked to the large French windows and out onto the balcony.

II.

THE large stone castle of the Dombbras nestled into the rocks, high up the hill, and overlooked a large fertile valley. As far as the eye could see along the hillside were vineyards, the vines heavy with the crop. And along the whole valley, on both sides of the deep, cool river, were clumps of shocked grain, and the floor of the valley was brown, and the sides of the hill green, and a lazy, blue sky overhead.

Half of the valley and part of the hill belonged to the beautiful Doña Maria and the rest belonged to the house of Dombra.

Nestled in the valley, straight down from the castle of the Dombbras, shone the roofs of the village.

On this night was the Carnival of the Harvest, and the elder brother of the house of Dombra looked out over the valley and mused.

Doña Maria did not care for him. It was his brother. He was lucky, his brother, and how happy they would be. But he himself was a soldier and settling down would not appeal to him. He would go back into the army and return to the campaigns.

He turned and looked into the room, but his brother had not yet come back, and he turned once more to gaze out across the valley and dream.

The younger brother arose as his caller closed a notebook in which he had been writing, and together they walked to the front entrance and out into the sunshine.

"I am sure that my men will capture the thief and return to you your horse, señor," said the chief.

"Thank you for calling," replied the younger son of the house of Dombra. "I have much confidence in you and your men." He held out his hand and shook that of his caller and bid him good day.

He reentered the room where his brother awaited him. "The horse will be returned, I am sure," he greeted his brother.

"And now, my brother," replied the elder, "come, let us finish our toast to the beautiful Doña Maria."

III.

THE younger brother's face set in grim lines as he reached for a glass, and then he drew back in consternation.

Both glasses contained an equal amount of wine.

"My brother," cried the elder one of the house of Dombra, coming quickly around to the side of his brother, "you are ill!"

"No, no; it is nothing," replied the younger weakly.

"But you will sit down a moment. The interview with the chief of the local police has upset you."

"No; it is nothing. I shall be quite all right in a moment." He sank down in a chair.

Surely one of the glasses had a lesser amount in it than the other, he thought. Surely his mind was playing a trick on him.

He looked over at the glasses on the table. They were both equally full, or maybe that one had just slightly less than the other.

The room swam before his eyes, and the elder brother reached to the table and taking up one of the glasses held it quite steadily to the younger brother's lips.

He opened his eyes and then shrank back in horror. "No, no, my dear brother; not that; I—I—do not care for wine, thank you."

The elder brother of the house of Dombra looked at the younger in surprise and placed the glass back on the table.

"My brother," he said, "you are ill. I shall call a physician. You must lie down."

"No; I still contend that it is nothing. A few minutes' rest, and I shall be quite all right."

Slumped in his chair he stared at the glasses and wondered. Surely his mind had played a trick on him. He wondered if his mind had not exaggerated on the hardly perceptible difference between the two glasses. He pictured the beautiful Doña Maria as she would appear that night at the carnival in her black mantilla and small mask.

She would be beautiful, he thought, and for a moment a great anger welled up within him.

Ah, he sighed, what difference did it make! It was his brother that she would choose.

He would brace up. He would stand up like a man and drink the toast. What mattered it who took the fatal glass? If his brother—ah, well, so he had planned it! If himself, what difference did it make? Would he not as lief be dead as to lose the beautiful Doña Maria?

"I feel much better now, my brother," he said as he stood up, "let us drink to the health of the beautiful Doña Maria. And may she make a good wife, and mother of his children, to the one whom the Fates have chosen."

They reached out and picked up the glasses from the table.

"To the beautiful Doña Maria," said the elder brother, holding his glass aloft.

IV.

THE younger brother held his glass in nerveless, shaking fingers, stared at his brother, and slowly raised his glass to his lips.

Then suddenly as the elder brother brought his glass down and placed it to his lips, he threw his own glass to the floor and leaped across the intervening space and dashed the glass from his brother's hand.

"No, no!" he cried. "You must not drink it."

The elder brother stepped back in surprise and then taking his weak and trembling brother by the arm, helped him to a seat.

"My brother," he said with concern in his voice, "surely you are ill and I shall call for a physician at once."

"No; I am not ill. You will never understand," replied the younger brother, and he wondered what explanation he could offer. He would not dare to tell the truth.

But he must. He was a cad, and he felt sickened all over. He would tell him and then go away.

"My brother," said the elder of the house of Dombra leaning over the chair in which his brother sat, "you must be brave. I have talked with the beautiful Doña Maria, and it is you whom she will choose."

The younger brother sat upright in his seat. "No, my brother; it must be you. I will go away. I will not be present at the carnival to-night. You are the one she will choose. I have seen it in her eyes."

"Fool!" cried the elder brother. "You are blind! Always it has been you in her eyes, and you could not see. I have spoken with her, I tell you."

"I could never face her," said the younger brother of the house of Dom-

bra; "in that glass I dashed from your hand was poison."

"My brother," said the elder softly, "the wine had set long in the glasses during the interview, and I poured it over the balcony and filled the glasses anew."

"*Dios!*" breathed the younger brother.

"My brother," said the elder softly, "I am proud of you: You have been tempted, and your good breeding saved you when you came to the test. A Dombra may falter, but he never fails. You must go to the carnival to-night, and she will meet you with open arms. I will remain for the ceremony and then return to the campaigns."

He helped his younger brother to his feet, and they embraced.

"You feel better now, my brother?" he asked.

"Yes, my dear brother; I feel quite all right now," replied the younger brother of the house of Dombra.

At His Word

ALICE: "What happened when your father told your fiancée he ought to put something aside for a rainy day?"

Ailsa: "A little later dad missed his raincoat."

Fairly Subtle

OLD MAID: "Would a good long pair of stockings hold all you want for Christmas?"

Widow: "No; but a pair of socks would."

Probably Correct

HIS WIFE: "A writer here explains why some husbands consider their wives angels."

Her Brute: "I suppose it is because they are always harping on something."

The Tender Soul

MRS. STICK: "I suppose she gave up music when her husband died?"

Mrs. Stamp: "No; she still plays, but only on the black keys."

Too Sharp

WIFE: "The maid has sharp ears."

Hubby: "Yes; I noticed that the doors are scratched around the key-holes."

Getting a Line

HE, soulfully: "I dreamed of you last night, Dorothy."

She, with interest: "What dress was I wearing?"

The Cynic

SON: "Father, what is politeness?"

Father: "Politeness is the art of concealing from other people what you think of them."

Seeking His Own

VISITOR, nervously: "Does the crystal gazer live here?"

Maid: "Yes, sir; but he's over at the palmist's getting his hand read."

Quite Different

KITTY: "Don't believe everything you hear."

Betty: "Certainly not! I just repeat it."

The Blase Father

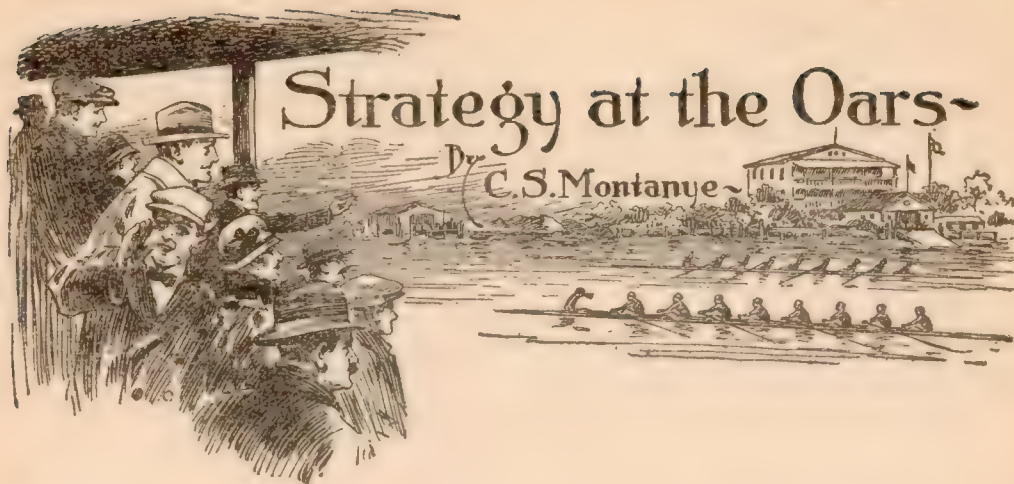
MOTHER: "It seems as if it takes Ethel's young man a frightfully long time to say good night."

Father: "Yes; much adieu about nothing."

Perhaps Men Deserve This

RUTH: "Rather sudden, isn't it? I don't see how a girl can marry a man she's known only two weeks."

Rene: "I don't know how she can marry one she's known longer."



THE Hargrave Hall first crew, in obedience to the command of Coach Watson, trailing after them in the launch, paddled into the float below the boat-house. Leeds, the little coxswain, emptied the shell, the crew donned sweaters, berthed the shell on its supports within the boat shed, and lined up on the float.

Leeds, watching the launch puff in and make fast, wondered sardonically what sort of a tirade Watson would unleash upon the worst eight the Hall had ever put in a boat to row down the silvery length of the Pamawassee River.

A scant ten days separated them from the coming big pull against the Benton Naval Academy eight—ten days—and the men of Hargrave Hall, as well as the fiery-tempered coach, knew they were pinning their hopes on a forlorn cause. The material for a great crew was there, a great coach directed them, but the great coach and all the vituperation he could call down upon the men had little effect.

A fighting spirit was totally lacking. A lethargy seemed to have settled over the shell from bow to stern. Instead of showing enthusiasm and dash, the eight rowed with the mechanical verve of wooden figures. Nothing that Wat-

son could say stirred them in the slightest.

Leeds watched the eight line up. Watson discarded his huge megaphone and climbed out of the launch. He was a rugged, weather-beaten individual with penetrating blue eyes and a severe mouth. The record he had achieved was no light or inconsequential one. Before coming to Hargrave Hall the man had handled the destinies of big varsity eights in the East.

"This afternoon," the coach began, "I'll spare you fellows your daily rake over the coals. By this time you doubtless have a pretty good idea of my opinion of you. I'll spare you a tongue-lashing, but don't think you're going to get off easy.

"Fellows," he went on, "I'm playing about the last card I have up my sleeve. I can't do anything with you, but maybe some one else can. So I sent for Tommy Murray. He's due at the Hall at six o'clock, and he'll have a few words to say to you in the gym at seven thirty. Show up and be on time. That's all."

As the crew turned to make a way toward the locker rooms, Leeds felt an indescribable tingle. Tommy Murray! The great Tommy Murray—the hero of past crews that had made Hargrave Hall famous—the celebrated stroke on

the greatest eight that had ever dipped a flashing sweep into the shining currents of the Pamawassee!

And now Murray, a grad of some six years, was coming back to the river to try to do something with the worst crew the Hall had ever turned out! Coming back ten days before the regatta with the Benton Naval Academy.

Not until they were in the locker rooms did the crew begin to buzz with a medley of opinions and speculations.

"Tommy Murray?" some one said, with a laugh. "Maybe, if he gets in and strokes us we'll be able to get a civil word out of Watson now and then!"

II.

AT half past seven to the dot, Murray came into the gymnasium. Leeds, excited by the floodtide of his imagination that conjured up a recollection of the renowned stroke's deeds, saw that Murray had changed but little from the picture of him that graced the center of the mantel in the crew club, standing between the high silver cups which his prowess had brought to the Hall.

He was a slim, alert man with a striking personality. He had an unflinching smile and mild gray eyes. After the general introduction dryly murmured by the coach, Murray swung himself up lightly onto a leather horse and looked the bunch over.

"Now for the lecture," Leeds heard No. 5 in the shell whisper behind him. "Let's go!"

For a minute or two the mild gray eyes appraised those before him. "I wonder," Murray began pleasantly, "if you chaps have any idea what coming back to Hargrave Hall means to me. You fellows will graduate within the next two, three, or four years. You'll leave here, but the grip of the old Hall will be tight around your hearts. It's something, an indefinable something, that you never lose."

"Now about the crew," he continued in the same tone. "Your coach telegraphed me a few days ago, and it wasn't a pleasant telegram, believe me. I won't tell you what he said, but I will tell you this: Hargrave Hall has always been supreme on the river. In ten days you meet and row against the Naval Academy eight, a splendid crew if what I've heard is authentic. Stop and consider what defeat will mean—not alone to you, not to the campus, not to the faculty, but particularly to the alumni—to those of us out in the world who have done things in the past, who are satisfied that the new men at Hargrave Hall will keep up the good work and carry on the old traditions."

He paused and smiled. Leeds wondered if those about him felt the same stir of enthusiasm that he was feeling.

"Being beaten by the Academy," Murray resumed quietly, "is a very serious matter. So serious, as a matter of fact, that it must not occur. Your coach accuses you of lacking a fighting spirit, of indifference. He has asked me to come here and try to put it into you. I'm going to try, and I know you fellows will meet me halfway. Just recollect for a minute what a thrashing will mean. Let your minds dwell on that, and show up to-morrow down at the boathouse with one firm resolve in mind. Tell yourself that you're not going to be beaten; that no matter how formidable a crew the Naval Academy has, you're going to win—for the college, for yourselves, for your coach, and for me!"

It was impossible for Leeds to judge the effect of Murray's presence. The crew grumbled at the prospect of harder work. They appeared at the appointed time the following afternoon, to find Watson and Murray conferring on the float. The shell, for some unknown reason, had been put overboard and lay alongside the wharf.

The former great stroke, in sweater

and cap, spoke briefly. "All right, cox. Get 'em seated. By the way, we're using a little heavier shell to-day. Don't be surprised if she doesn't pull as well."

The rudder was fitted, and the new sweeps brought out. Leeds eyed the stetchers and slides.

"Places!" the coxswain ordered, picking up the rudder lines. "Four! Lace in quickly, fellows! All right, Edwards. No. 3 now."

The crew seated themselves.

"Paddle them across to the east shore and let them warm up," Murray said from the launch. "Let them peel sweaters, and give them a racing start when you see me signal. Keep raising the stroke, and make sure they finish it out. I want to see what they can do against the current. Understand, cox?"

"Yes, sir," Leeds replied. "Ready all?" he barked as the slides moved up. "Forward! Paddle!"

Until the sun dipped down behind the hills to the west, Murray kept them going up and down the river. The puffing launch circled and cut in on them, dipped off and drifted back. He put them through all their paces before he megaphoned Leeds to take them in.

"That's all until to-morrow. I'll walk back with you, cox," Murray said shortly. "Pull on a sweater. And never mind berthing the shell."

"Yes, sir," Leeds answered, surprised by the order not to berth the boat.

Murray was waiting for him near the wooden duck walk that led to the bluff above. The sun was all the way down, but its ruddy conflagration still lingered over the opposite hills. Leeds fell mechanically into step beside Murray, who said nothing until they had reached the walk that led toward the gymnasium.

"This lack of fighting spirit," the ex-stroke began, "isn't anything new. Football teams get it sometimes, baseball nines, basketball teams. Frequently it

comes from overconfidence, oftentimes from laziness, but usually from indifference. That is what I diagnose as the complaint of this year's crew. You seem to be the only one free from its contagion."

Leeds flushed. "It's nice of you to say that, sir. Defeating Benton means a great deal to me. For a long time I tried to make the crew. Being coxswain on the Hall's eight means everything to me, sir."

Murray flung an arm over his shoulders. "I suspected as much. Let me tell you something—this crew is going to win in spite of itself. There are tricks to every trade, and if inspiration fails to spur the men on, why, we'll trick them into winning—with your help."

Leeds swallowed and glanced up. "My help?"

Tommy Murray inclined his head. "Tell me where your rooms are, and I'll stop in after dinner. I always seem to be able to explain things to better advantage when I have a square meal under my belt. Will eight o'clock or so be convenient?"

Leeds said that it would.

III.

THE week dragged to a lengthy conclusion. It was impossible for the casual observer to know if the coming of the great Murray had helped to put the crew on its mettle. Each day when the crew presented themselves for a practice spin, they found the shell overboard and awaiting them. Each day Murray handled the megaphone while Coach Watson sat stolid and silent in the stern of the launch, glowering at them.

The grad's advice was never quick or impatient. Not once did he lose his temper at some foolish blunder and reprimand them. Yet he was painstaking in every instance.

When the starboard oars rowed light

or clipped, Murray focused all his attention on the fact until it was corrected. He took each man in hand and drilled him separately. And, as the days went past, he refrained from further mention of any possible defeat. Winning to Murray was evidently an assured fact, if one was to listen to his conversation.

Almost before Leeds was aware of it, the evening before the fatal day had come. He brought the shell in from the river, and as usual left it on the breast of the current while the crew broke ranks and hurried off to dress. Coach Watson disappeared in the gathering gloom. Leeds and Murray went up the steps together.

The man who had come back to Hargrave Hall paused on the walk and turned. Down below, the river, a dusky stream, flowed from its sanctuary in the hills. The opposite shore was only faintly visible.

Murray spoke in a low, serious tone. "The old Pamawassee! How peaceful now in the gloaming! How different from to-morrow! What tales the river would tell if it had a voice! What do you think, Leeds? Do they suspect?"

The full charm of the moment was upon the coxswain. "I'm sure they don't yet, sir. To-day, no. Perhaps to-morrow."

IV.

ON either side of the river, caught in the brilliant sunshine the next day, pennants and bunting fluttered in a soft, bland breeze. The blue and white of the Benton Naval Academy was a gentle background for the scarlet and black of Hargrave Hall. Everywhere the white uniforms of the midshipmen were visible. There was a certain confidence in the air on the part of Benton that the Hall was strikingly aware of.

Still the men of Hargrave Hall threw it off under a certainty of their own. The great Tommy Murray had dropped

everything to come to the river and take the crew in hand. How could they lose? Hargrave Hall had never known the bitter sting of defeat. Its records were untarnished. It had been and would still be supreme at the oars!

Toward four o'clock Leeds and the crew went up the river in Coach Watson's launch, towing the shell behind it. One mile and three-quarters from the finish line the Academy eight waited at the starting point. The Hall put over its crew, and both eights then listened to the referee's instructions; back of them, a press of motor boats and small river craft waited the starting signal anxiously.

With his megaphone strapped over his mouth and his hands gripping the rudder lines, Leeds knew varied thoughts. Would Murray's strategy succeed in the face of all obstacles? Had bulldog courage and fighting spirit been hammered into the eight oarsmen who sat immovable before him—waiting? Would the Hall's worst eight surprise even the pessimists who, weeks previous, had shaken disconsolate heads? Had Murray's coming been only in vain?

"Are you both ready?"

The voice of the referee came to Leeds. He spoke thickly.

"Forward!"

The slides responded. Leeds waited another instant, watching the brown arms of the Academy eight swing out. Then the starting pistol sounded.

"Row!"

A medley of shouts blending with the scream of whistles that awoke trailing, distant echoes sounded, with the rattle of locks, the command of the Academy coxswain:

"All together, men! Pull it through! Deep now, and lengthen them out!"

Both shells got away to a perfectly timed racing start. It was the inclination of Hargrave Hall to dart into an immediate lead. With surprising swift-

ness they opened up with an advantage of three lengths. Leeds, barking orders, knew that achievement meant the conserving of strength for crucial minutes that would come farther down the river—minutes of agonizing effort, of struggle and strain, when courage would be drained to its last red drop.

He pulled the stroke down long enough to allow the smooth-rowing enemy shell to come abreast with them, holding the eight to a pace that was even, steady. In what seemed little plunged on. Leeds could hear the buoy that marked the quarter mile was behind them, and they were flashing on to the half-mile marker.

That was passed presently, and Leeds let out a notch. As if rowing on some prearranged schedule the Academy oarsmen began to draw away.

"Row, row, row!" Leeds cried. "They're two lengths to the good. You're clipping. Five! Eyes in the boat! Row, row, row!"

Like a pendulum, swinging in perfect time, the eight men moved back and forward. The mile flag dropped past, and they rounded a bend in the Pama-wassee. Far ahead now, Leeds could distinguish the judge's boat anchored at the finish line, could see the swirl of flags and pennants and hear the whistles that greeted both crews as they came in sight.

He raised the stroke relentlessly. Intuition told him that they were holding the enemy even; but that was all—holding them, not gaining an inch. The mile-and-a-quarter buoy shot past the stern of the shell; a half mile more, and the race would be over. It was time, Leeds understood, to drive them.

"A half mile more! Only a half mile! We can win if you row! Make them longer, and finish them out! Somebody's catching! Row!"

Like a splendid team both shells plunged on. Leeds could hear the hoarse coaxing of Benton's coxswain.

He felt running along the length of the shell a certain unsteadiness, a weakness that told him he could not expect much more. Where was the line? He decided they must be nearly to the finish, for the scream of whistles had grown much louder and he glimpsed masses of banked humanity on the shore.

Somebody was clipping again badly. He raised the stroke another dangerous notch, the pleading gone from his voice.

"The finish, men! We'll win! We'll win if you're not quitters, if you're not quitters! We'll win for old Hargrave Hall if you'll only put some bulldog into it! Row! Fight!"

They whirled still closer to the finish line. In the heated excitement of the minute Leeds was unable to calculate whether the Academy crew had drawn away or was still locked with the men of Hargrave Hall, struggling as they struggled. He seemed conscious only of the stroke's face before him, twisted into a mask of pain, of the perspiration that glistened on his arms and dripped from his chin. The shell was wobbling badly, but the line could not be much more than a watch tick away.

"Lift her over! We're at the finish!" Leeds shouted, in a desperate frenzy of endeavor, exhorting them to a final effort—bringing every quiver of his own nerve force to help drive them across. "We're beaten, you quitters! Beaten—because—you—won't—try!"

The whistles and cheers were deafening. Then, and it happened so quickly that Leeds failed to grasp it, they cut past the judge's boat, the scarlet and black of Hargrave Hall a mad blur before his vision.

"All right! Let her run!"

The stroke dropped his oars and buried his face in his hands. Launches swarmed in about them. Leeds wearily dropped the rudder lines and lifted his head. The race was over and past history. Had they won? Had they justified Tommy Murray's private opinion

or had a Hargrave Hall crew been conquered for the first known time?

His answer came not only from the banks of the river, from the clamor of the great bronze bell in the watch tower below the campus, but from the exulting tones of Coach Watson in the launch that crept up on their port bow.

"By a quarter length! Hargrave Hall won in the most stirring finish ever seen on this river! Fellows, I'll take it all back. I'm proud of you."

V.

BONFIRES were blazing brightly outside of the crew club, and on the walks Leeds could hear a triumphant chant. He looked down the long table where the eight sat, where Tommy Murray graced the head of the board, where Coach Watson allowed his severe mouth to mirror a smile.

The banquet was the aftermath of a great day. Yet, Leeds knew, there were explanations to be given. There were things that had to be explained. Those who had pulled a conquering oar could not be allowed blissfully to imagine that they had achieved only on their own initiative. The thought ran through his mind just at the time a clamor went up from the lower end of the table.

"Speech, coxswain! Speech, Leeds!"

Before he could drop his napkin he felt himself lifted to a standing position on the seat of his chair. He looked down the glittering table. A silence had fallen over it, an expectant silence.

"If you start with, 'It gives me great pleasure,' I'll bounce a plate off your nut!" some gentle student called.

Leeds cleared his throat. "I'm not going to sing any hymn of praise," he said grimly. "I'm going to tell you some plain, unvarnished facts. I don't know if I'm allowed to, but the race is over, the Hall still keeps her glory, and it's only right that you fellows know who really won to-day."

"What do you mean—who won?" some one inquired facetiously. "Hasn't anybody told you yet that we beat the Academy?"

Leeds drew a breath. "You didn't win!" he shot back. "Tommy Murray won for you to-day out there on the Pamawassie! He won because he came here and knew he was dealing with almost-hopeless material. He won because he tricked you into winning! You hear that? It was Murray and the trick he played on you that made you defeat Benton this afternoon."

There was another sudden silence. From outside, the songs of the undergraduates stole up to the windows and crept in.

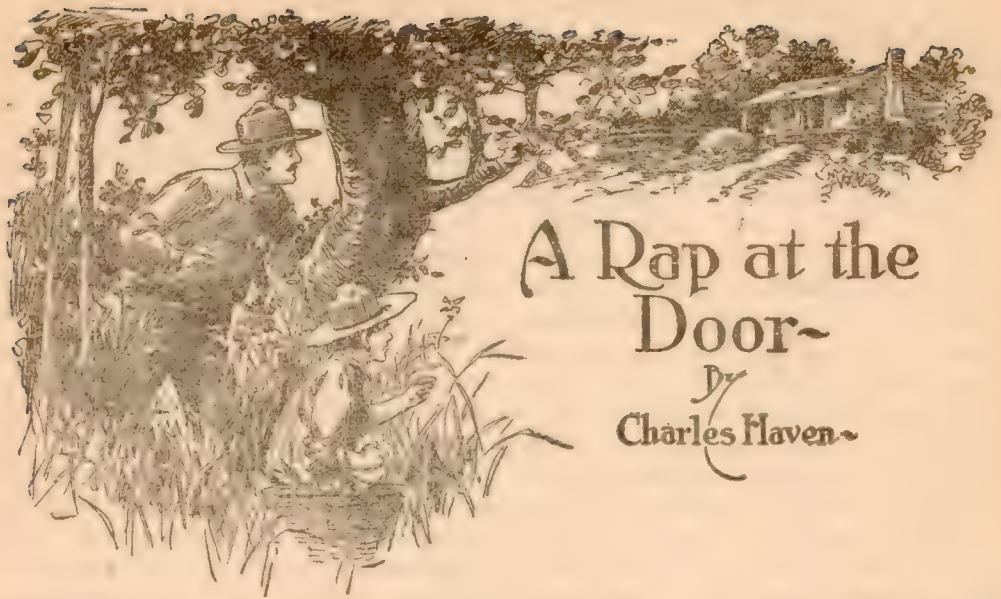
"What trick?"

Leeds smiled faintly. "Murray had to handicap you. If you were handicapped he figured that when the real test came you'd have just that much advantage, an advantage that would come to you in spite of yourselves. You thought it funny you never berthed the shell or put it overboard. You thought it was some newfangled idea of his; but there was a method in his madness. First, the oars themselves. They were especially weighted and sent out here for practice use. Then the shell——"

He was interrupted by a sudden murmur. It was as if light had dawned quickly and comprehensively. It grew in volume. "And the shell—the boat—was weighted!"

Leeds smiled. "Yes; it was weighted, but so artfully—under the water line—that you couldn't suspect. The weight was increased gradually every day. A trick, but one which, combined with the oars, put you across. That's why I say that Tommy Murray really won to-day. All together now, fellows! Show him what you think of him!"

The roar that rang out rolled through the windows and echoed down the dusk where the bonfires blazed and laid gleams along the edge of the river.



A Rap at the Door~

By
Charles Haven~

A LONG the main residence street of Westover rode young Sheriff Tifton Hale, haggard from loss of sleep and other hardship, his clothing torn and stained with mud from the well-nigh trackless Congaree River Swamp. His horse, too, was weary and mud stained. Under a magnolia draped with streamers of gently swaying Spanish moss, Hale drew rein, faced old Judge Peter Tannehill's big house, and hallooed softly.

A young woman, handsome and wholesome looking, hastened down between the rows of lilac and jasmine. "We were worried about you, Tif," she said, smiling in relief. "Did you find any trace of your desperado?"

She put a hand familiarly on the neck of his tired horse. The girl and the sheriff were to be married soon—if Hale came out alive, and there were those who said that he probably would not.

Tifton Hale laughed a little, and showed her a bullet hole in the crown of his wide-rimmed gray-felt hat. "I rather think I did find a trace of him, Beth! He set the woods afire all around me, so to speak, and it's a wonder he

didn't hit me; but he was shooting on the run, and the brush was rather thick. Of course, I shot at him, too, though if I made any hit he didn't show any sign of it.

"He's desperate, all right," Hale went on. "There's no mistaking that. It's long been his boast, I'm told, that he won't be taken alive. There's enough against him to hang him a dozen times, you see, honey, to say nothing of the first murder, the killing of Andrew Ellison. It's odd that he'd come back to his old-home section, Beth, isn't it?"

Beth Tannehill answered soberly: "Maybe not, Tif. I've heard that the scenes of their crimes hold a fascination for criminals, and perhaps it is true in the case of this Farley."

"I don't take much stock in that," Hale said. "I'm inclined to think Farley came back to this county because he thought officers in general would be less apt to look for him here. Well, I must be getting along to the office, now. I'll try to see you this afternoon. 'Bye!" he exclaimed.

He patted her hand, smiled down at her, lifted his hat, and rode off. She stood watching him. She was afraid

for him. "Sand Hill" Farley, the killer, was a dangerous man.

The next minute her father, sedate old Judge Tannehill, hailed her from a gateway at one side of the near-by lawn. She turned quickly toward him.

"Tif came in from the swamp just now," she said. "He was not successful."

Tannehill frowned. "I was not successful, either, my dear. Myra Ellison refuses to accept any assistance whatever. Such foolish pride! Since Andrew was killed the place has gone down so that she can't raise cotton on it any more, and now she is depending altogether upon the yams that little Thomas sells from house to house! It's heart-rending, to see that poor lad going about with his basket of yams. Of course, he should be in school."

"Yes, of course," the judge's daughter agreed. "Well, it's fortunate that yams are a staple food in Westover, anyway."

The two turned toward the house, a colonial-style old structure half hidden among trees and vines.

II.

A FEW minutes after Tifton Hale had left Beth Tannehill, the sheriff walked into his office. His chief deputy shook hands with him, pulled out a chair for him, and heard the tidings he bore.

"I've got some news myself," said Deputy Greene. "That Atlanta bank that Farley held up has increased the reward to four thousand, dead or alive, and has put a big secret-service man on Farley's trail. This detective was here, and he left us a complete description of the outlaw—tall, thin, and stooped; beady, jaundiced eyes and ragged beard when last seen; low forehead; thin lips; poor teeth—and so on. I remember about every word of the description, and it's there on your desk if you want to see it."

Hale looked up suddenly. "I'll go back to the swamp to-night, Greene, and I'll need a fresh horse; please have it ready for me. My best chance for locating this man is by the light of his camp fire at night; he'd have to depend upon the smoke of a fire, you see, to keep the mosquitoes from eating him alive. Did I tell you, George, that he had an army-type automatic pistol, which——"

Hale was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a barefoot boy with a basket of roundish, yellow sweet potatoes.

"Hello, Thomas!" The high sheriff smiled at the brave little son of widowed Myra Ellison. "My Aunt Em needs some yams, I think. I'll take them all."

"But I sold her some just this morning," Thomas said, his manner rather grown up, "and I'm sure she won't need any more to-day. I thought perhaps Mr. Greene——"

"Sure," cut in Greene. "I'll take all of 'em. My wife is foolish about yams, and I like 'em myself. Pour 'em out in a corner there, Thomas, will you?"

The boy hastened to obey. Then he faced Hale. "You've been out looking for Sand Hill Farley. I almost hope you don't catch him!"

"Why, son?"

"Because. I almost hope nobody will catch him, until I'm a man. Then I'll be sheriff, and I'll catch him myself. He didn't give my daddy a chance, and he's got to pay for it. Thanks, Mr. Greene, but you owe me only forty cents; here's your dime. Good-by, gentlemen!" He turned and was gone.

George Greene looked toward his superior officer. "Don't that beat the devil, Tif? 'Good-by, gentlemen!' Only ten years old, but an Ellison all over, under, around, and through."

Tifton Hale seemed very serious. "Can't you see, George," he drawled, "that I've got to catch Sand Hill Farley now?"

"Yes, Tif; I can see that you have. After what the boy said, you sure have. It's the big purpose of that boy's life to know that Farley has paid. I've heard him talk about it before, Tif; and his mother has taught him very carefully that it's a matter of justice, and not revenge."

III.

JUST at nightfall, the high sheriff rode out of Westover by way of a little-used street, to look once more for the desperado whose boast was that no man could take him alive.

Beth Tannehill, on her way home from the post office the following day, met Hale on foot; it was almost squarely across the street from an old house that had stood empty for two days. The young officer was muddy and bedraggled, but he was smiling brightly.

"Oh, you caught Farley!" cried Judge Tannehill's daughter. "Tell me about it, Tif—please!"

"Don't you think that seeing you is enough to make me glad?" Hale asked gallantly, removing his broad-rimmed hat. "All right, I'll tell you about it, and it has a surprise in its climax. Here goes:

"I entered the swamp down near, where Hunting Creek runs into it, and found the undergrowth there too thick for my horse; so I dismounted and sent the horse back with a knot in the rein as a signal to Greene that I was all right. It was pitch dark in the swamp, and the mosquitoes were very bad. I went on down the creek for a mile or so, always looking for the glow of Farley's camp fire, and then I climbed a tree to make observations.

"Well," Hale went on, "I saw the glow of a fire, off some two hundred yards from me, in a clump of live oaks. I was all of an hour in making that two hundred yards. Sand Hill Farley has

been hunted so much that he listens and watches as a matter of instinct, and I figured that he'd be gone like a shot if I made the slightest noise. I had to be certain that I had the 'drop' on him, you know, since he certainly wouldn't stop at one more killing in an attempt to escape.

"I made the last hundred feet of it on my hands and knees, Beth, which is a ticklish job where there are rattlers. Soon I was able to make out the figure of a man sitting in the smoke of the fire as protection from mosquitoes; his back was toward me. Inch by inch I crept on, with my revolver ready. When I was within ten yards of him, I went to my feet and leveled my gun.

"'Don't move a single muscle,' I warned. 'Now you can put up your hands.'

"Except that its hands went upward obediently, the figure sat as still as before. I went closer.

"'Stand up,' I ordered, 'and if you try any monkey business, I'll certainly shoot.'

"He rose, with his hands still in the air and his back still toward me. The smoke screened him from me somewhat. I walked around to where I could see his face. It was the Atlanta bank's detective!"

Beth Tannehill smiled momentarily; then she broke off a fragrant cape-jasmine flower that had stolen through the picket fence beside them. "That's disappointing, Tif," she said; "but don't worry. You'll get him. You haven't failed yet, have you?" She spoke softly.

Across near-by lots walked little Thomas Ellison, with a basket of sweet potatoes, and he saw the officer and his fiancée.

"When I'm a man," the boy whispered to himself, "I'll be sheriff, and I'll catch Sand Hill Farley."

As George Greene had so wisely said, it was a matter of justice, and not of

vengeance; he was an Ellison—"all over, under, around, and through."

IV.

FROM one of the lower corners of a front-room window in the house across the street, the house that had been empty for two days, a pair of beady, jaundiced, and bloodshot eyes peered toward Tifton Hale and Beth Tannehill. Sand Hill Farley was hiding here under the law's very nose, because he thought it the safest place possible for him.

Farley had some food, and there was a pitcher pump in the kitchen. Water he needed very often, for he was ill with swamp fever. It broke his limbs, almost, kept him freezing one minute and on fire the next. As dry as bleached bones were his thin lips now, and they had cracked, and it hurt when he licked them like a sick wolf.

He saw that it was the Tannehill girl with Hale. He remembered her as a child; she had been so afraid of him that she had run at the bare sight of him. It had amused him greatly, he remembered. Then Sand Hill Farley drew his army-type automatic, and sought an aim at Sheriff Tifton Hale. Officers of the law had hounded him until he hated them with a hellish hatred.

Then the fact that he had but a single cartridge left came back to him with a distinct jar. If he fired it, he would be taken alive, regardless of whether he hit Tifton Hale or missed him—and he had sworn over and over that he would not be thus taken; if he had a religion, it was that.

Sand Hill Farley crept back to a corner of the room. The automatic was still in his hand, still with the safety off. He sank into a miserable pile, and blinked his bloodshot eyes. Things were strangely dim to him. Delirium was upon him again.

The sight of Hale had wrought havoc in his evil soul, had upset his consciousness oddly. He began to see the forms of men that he knew were dead—shadowy, indistinct, silent, and among them he recognized the patrician Andrew Ellison—the first of them all.

Ellison spoke to him hollowly. "The end is very near for you, Farley."

"The end!" The hunted man panted. "Tifton Hale won't get me alive!"

There was a queer glow about Andrew Ellison's sad, quiet face. He repeated: "The end is very near for you, Farley."

"They won't get me alive!" Farley cried. "I——"

Interrupting him there came a succession of sounds, sounds that were real, and not a delirious fancy—a rumble of many heavy footsteps on the veranda just beyond the front door; and then a sharp and imperative rapping. It was the little yam peddler, Thomas Ellison, with his inevitable basket; the youngster didn't know the house was empty, of course.

"I will not hang!" cried Sand Hill Farley. He put the muzzle of the automatic to his burning temple, and pulled the trigger on his last cartridge.

The boy was so frightened by the roar of the weapon that he did not wait to pick up the yams that he had spilled on the veranda, the yams that had made a rumbling noise so much like rapid footfalls. Man though he wished to be, it was a relief to find himself in the arms of Beth Tannehill, while Tifton Hale ran into the empty house to see what it was that had happened there.

That was an eventful year in the life of little Thomas Ellison. For one thing, he was given four thousand dollars, the amount of the reward that was out for the killer of his father, dead or alive. For another, he served, by the special request of both bride and groom, as "best man" at a big wedding at Judge Peter Tannehill's home.



The Return of Colorado Jim.

By
George Goodchild.

AUTHOR OF - "COLORADO JIM"
"THE RIDER OF THE RANGES" - ETC.

AFTER an absence of three years "Colorado Jim" Conlan was returning to Dawson City, with his dog, Slick. In his camp in the woods, he heard a woman's cry and, following his dog, he came upon another camp where a man lay dead, killed by the fall of a rotten pine branch, and a girl stood over him, weeping. The girl, Rosita Mannering, and her father were on their way to Dawson, where Daniel Mannering, proprietor of the Aurora Hotel, had offered the girl's father, his own half brother, a job as bookkeeper. Having buried the dead man, Colorado Jim escorted Rosita to Dawson, where he left her.

Rosita was appalled at meeting "Two-gun Mannering, as the hotel man was called. The proprietor of the saloon, dance hall, and gambling rooms told her that he had no clerical work to be done, but that she could dance with the patrons of his establishment, at which she revolted. Realizing, however, that she was at Mannering's mercy, she donned the gaudy dance dress and took her place with the other "belles" of the Aurora.

Meanwhile Colorado Jim was living in his tent near the town. Plagued by memories of the past, he had taken to drink as a way of forgetfulness. Here Ruff, a bearded giant and an old friend of Jim's, accompanied by Joe Cannan, a young man who was searching for adventure, arrived and met Colorado Jim. They met later in the Aurora Hotel, which the three men frequented, and where Cannan had remarkable luck at the gambling tables. Cannan was greatly attracted by Rosita, with whom he often danced, and this, added to the

lure of roulette, caused him to prolong his stay in Dawson. Usually, when Rosita saw him, Colorado Jim had been drinking heavily.

Then the news came that gold had been found near the Ogilvie River, and a rush to the new Eldorado began. Ruff and Cannan were going, and Jim said he would go, too. On their last night in Dawson Cannan's strange luck held at roulette until Mannering interfered and upset the table, the light was extinguished, and a regular battle followed. Ruff got Cannan out, to prevent detention by the police, after he had said good-by to Rosita.

On her way to bed Rosita heard a groan coming from a small storeroom and, opening the door, she saw, lying on a mattress in the corner, Colorado Jim with a big red smear across his face.

CHAPTER VI.

A PUZZLING SITUATION.

UTTERING a startled cry, Rosita ran to the prostrate form. She dreaded to find a bullet wound in some vital place, but was relieved when none came to view. It looked as if Colorado Jim had been hit with a sharp implement on the head. She was still hesitating what to do when she heard a

step behind her and turned her head to see Mannering.

"What are you doing in here?" he growled.

"I heard a moan. You—you did this."

"You are a fool. The man was drunk and fell and hit his head on the corner of the table."

"Then why did you hide him here?"

"To prevent any fuss. There are lots of people in Dawson looking around for a chance to close me down."

"I don't believe you."

"I'm not asking you to. There's nothing much wrong with him. He can stay here to-night. By morning he'll have sobered down."

"Aren't you going to send for a doctor?"

"Doctor! He don't need no doctor. I'll put a bandage round his head. That'll fix him all right."

"I'll do that."

"No; you won't. Clear out and mind your own business!"

"If anything happens——"

"Don't you threaten me!" he stormed. "Go now, before I lose my temper."

When Rosita had gone, Mannering made no attempt to carry out his promise. Instead he spurned the unconscious man with his boot and let loose a curse. But for the lucky blow with the revolver, Jim would have dealt harshly with him. He had got it home in the nick of time, and all he regretted was that it was not more serious.

As he was about to leave, he noticed a long envelope projecting from Jim's pocket. Mannering took it and saw that it was addressed to James Conlan at a hotel in Winnipeg. Without the slightest hesitation he opened it and extracted the contents. He whistled as he read the brief note:

DEAR SIR: In accordance with your instructions we have disposed of the Chinese bonds. The net sum realized is £32,196, and this amount has been placed to your credit.

It was signed by the manager of a leading English bank and was dated three months back. Mannering licked his lips as he repeated the amount. Thirty-two thousand pounds! Then the rumors he had heard were true! Scotty had asserted that Conlan had made a fortune in the big gold strike, and here was proof.

Full of envy, Mannering went to bed. He himself was in no enviable position, for although the Aurora brought handsome profits he had spent a lot of money in improvements. In addition Cannan's recent exploit had hit him hard. He hated Jim more than ever for having all this money, and living like a "down and out" in spite of it.

The next morning he went to look at the injured man. The noise of the opening door aroused Jim. He blinked at the scowling intruder.

"Who the——" He halted abruptly and felt his scalp. Then he looked confused and glared at Mannering.

"Wondering where you are, eh?"

"Sure!"

"You're lucky not to be in hell."

"Let up! What are you saying? How did I get this bump on my brain case? Who am——"

Mannering wrinkled his brows as Jim halted again. There was something in his attitude that was strange. It was evident that he had forgotten what happened the night before, but the last unfinished question was significant of more than that.

"Why did you do that?" queried Mannering cautiously.

"Do what?"

"Get dead drunk and try to shoot up the place?"

"What place? Say, will you——" Again came the halt and the baffled expression. Then he laughed a trifle nervously. "Of course; that was it. I went a bit too heavy with the bottle. I suppose you brought me in here?"

"I did."

"Thanks, Mr.—"

"Mannering. You ain't telling me you've forgotten my name?"

"Not a bit. It jest slipped my memory."

Mannering, however, knew different. If Jim remembered anything at all he would have adopted quite a different attitude. He was convinced now that Jim had no recollection of anything that had happened before in his life. Whether it was due to the blow on the head, or to an excess of alcohol, or both combined, did not matter much. The all-important fact was clear, and he knew that Jim was trying to hide it from him out of sensitiveness.

"You'd better rest a bit," he said. "Shall I send you in some breakfast?"

"Couldn't eat a darn thing."

"A drink, then?"

"Sure. My throat is parched."

Mannering nodded and left him. He mixed a strong cocktail and sent Gus in with it. When the boy came back he buttonholed him. "Did he drink it?"

"You bet! Nearly all at once."

"Did he say anything?"

"He asked me his name, and I told him. That was a bit queer, wasn't it?"

"Not much. He fell down and hurt his head. Now you run along and sweep up?"

Mannering sat in his office chair turning over the letter which he had taken from Jim. It seemed to him that chance had given him a great opportunity. Here was a man, with no memory of his past, possessing a considerable fortune. It required only brains to make gain out of that, and his own position was so desperate he could not afford to miss a chance.

He remembered Scotty's assertion that Jim had been married and divorced, and in the office were back files of several newspapers. He spent the day searching through them, and in the evening his patience was rewarded. He found a report of the divorce proceed-

ings brought by Angela Conlan against her husband. It was brief, for the case was undefended.

Sure of his ground now, Mannering began to develop his scheme. When he had gone over it several times he sent for Katie who was on the premises. She lounged in, smoking one of her cigarettes as usual. To her surprise, he was most polite, pulling forward a chair for her and opening a bottle of champagne—one of his most expensive brands. Katie's eyes were like saucers as he held up the sparkling liquid.

"Here's health, Katie!"

"Same to you!" she replied. "What's the game, Mannering?"

"It's a big game, Katie, and a profitable one. If you're good I'll let you in on it."

"Guess I'll have to earn all I get."

"You will; but it's easy money. There's a lot of it, too; how much I don't know at present. Katie, have you any objection to marrying a man worth probably half a million dollars?"

Katie put down her glass and stared. "Lead me to him," she said.

"Good! Now, listen! I can put you wise to handling a great deal of money, but you've got to use tact; do you get that?"

"I've got enough tact to build houses with. What's all this about? Why don't you get to the point?"

"I'm coming to it. There is a certain fellow not far from here who is bloated with dollars. Moreover he doesn't know who he is from Adam. I want to introduce you to him as his wife."

"Eh?"

"Who's to say otherwise? He's that sensitive about his lapse of memory he won't even admit he's lost it. But you'll have to go warily, Katie."

"I don't get you yet. If I pretend to be his wife, that doesn't make me her. If he's got all this money, he may cling to it like a leech. Most men do."

"While they live." There was such

significance in the words that they left no room for misunderstanding.

"I see," she mused. "You mean to——"

"S-sh! You can leave that to me. I'm in desperate straits. Likely as not he'll drink himself to death, but if not—if not—well, there are accidents."

Katie shuddered a little at this. "Who is he, anyway?" she asked.

"Jim Conlan, the fellow they call Colorado Jim."

"Say, he's a hard seed!"

"He was, but now he is badly knocked and doesn't care a damn what happens next. He ran into trouble last night and——"

"Into you, you mean?"

"Maybe! Anyway, I've got him safe here, and if you play up to this part you'll have cause never to regret it."

"You mean—that if anything happens to him I'll be the next of kin?"

"That's so."

"But saying I'm his wife ain't the same thing legally."

"I've thought that out. The fellow's as soft and sentimental as a woman. If he thinks he's lived with you for a considerable time it won't be difficult to lug him before a sky pilot. He's got-enough conscience to satisfy a cardinal."

"And then?"

"That's your part. I'll fix the rest. When he got hurt he was about to join the stampede. It'll be as well to let him do that."

"Not on your life! Ruff and that boy have gone. We'd be bound to run into them, or else Scotty or some other fellows who know me. They wouldn't swallow the story."

"I told you I had thought out everything. Do you imagine I am fool enough to overlook things like that? Waal, are you on this or not?"

"You're sure the money's there?"

"Positive!"

"And we share up—equally?"

"On the level! After all, it is you who will touch the money, and I shall be in your hands."

Katie poured herself another glass of champagne and drank it with a hand that trembled slightly. The part she did not like was that which Mannering was going to play, for with all her lack of moral character she drew the line at bloodshed.

"It—it's dangerous," she said.

"Every big game is dangerous, but the risk is with me and not with you. Think what you could do with a quarter of a million dollars or so. Isn't it worth a little risk?"

"I'll do it," she agreed huskily. "I've never had a chance in life. In a year or two I'll be no further use up here. Give me another drink."

"Not now! I want you to see Conlan soon, and it's better you should have a clear head. You'll have to cut out some of the rough stuff, Katie, if you are going to get away with this. Not so darned many cigarettes and less swearing."

"I can be an archangel when I try. Give me a call when you want me."

She sailed off, and Mannering rubbed his hands. His next task was to break the news to Jim. He found Jim still resting in the small room, for in truth Jim knew not what to do next. For reasons difficult to explain, he wanted to hide the fact that his mind was a blank, and he welcomed Mannering since the hotel man would be able to fill in some of the gaps.

"Well, how goes it?" inquired Mannering.

"Not too bad. Guess I'll have to pack up."

"For the stampede?"

"Eh?"

"I understood that you and your wife were going to join the rush up to Ogilvie, where they've struck gold——"

"Wifel!" gasped Jim.

"Sure! She's wanting to know what

has become of you. I kept this business from her. Thought it was better so."

"Thanks! I suppose I did get a bit fresh last night. Where is my—my wife?"

"In the hotel. Shall I bring her in?"

"Yes; I suppose you had—— No; not now. I don't feel like hitting the trail to-day. Tell her I'll see her in the morning. She had better get the gear ready."

It was an artful effort to hide his ignorance of where his belongings were, and it was evident that he wanted the delay in order to try to recall the past. The one great fear in Mannering's mind was that Jim might suddenly recover his memory before the plan matured.

"I'll tell her," he said. "Of course she's a bit worried."

"Yep; I suppose she is."

When Mannering had gone Jim walked up and down the small room. The possibility of possessing a wife had never occurred to him. The only thing that crept into his memory was a black dog—his dog whom he called "Slick." It was curious that the dog should stand out against the blank wall of forgetfulness.

"A wife!" he muttered. "Holy smoke, where did I find her!"

Growing tired of the confined space he left it later and wandered into the saloon. There had been a tremendous exodus from Dawson, and the place was comparatively empty. He found some money in his wallet and bought a drink, then another and another, until he realized that his head was getting even more confused. Then he went out into the snow and uttered a sigh of relief as he breathed the cold air of the night.

Wandering on aimlessly, he suddenly came upon a tent and the ashes of a camp fire. He was staring at these when a great black dog rushed at him and leaped up in an ecstasy of delight.

"Slick!" he cried. "Why, you're my dog! Oh, boy!"

He hugged the fine animal in his great joy of finding one small link with the past, and Slick laid his big head against the beloved face and was contented.

A yelping from close by disclosed three more dogs—strangers to him. It was evident that they, like Slick, were nearly starved. Jim concluded that he must have bought them in order to join the stampede. In addition there was a lot of gear, foodstuffs, and a good sled. Yes; this was his camp without doubt, or Slick would not be there.

Accordingly he started a fire and fed the starving animals. Then he decided to rest there for the night and pick up his wife early on the morrow. One thing puzzled him and that was the absence of any feminine attire. Probably his wife had preferred to stay at the Aurora. That would account for it. He began to wonder what she was like and whether her departure from the camp was in any way due to his habits, which he had cause to suspect already.

"What a mix-up!" he growled. "Maybe she hates me pretty well? I shouldn't be surprised."

CHAPTER VII.

AN AGREEMENT MADE.

THAT evening Mannering suffered a severe blow. He sent the boy to Katie's room to inform her of what had taken place and was told that Katie was ill and that the boy could not get any sense out of her. He departed immediately to discover exactly what this meant and found his confederate in a state of high fever.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Leave me alone. I'm dying."

She lay on the bed, tossing from side to side, and it became evident that some form of illness was developing. Mannering dispatched the boy for a doctor, from whom he learned later that Katie had a bad attack of influenza and must remain in bed.

The hotel proprietor saw his scheme doomed to failure. It was necessary that it should be put into operation forthwith. Any delay might be disastrous. Mannering was not the type of man to bow his head to adversity. Something had to be done to counter this piece of bad luck. Then his eyes fell on Rosita, who was going into the dance room.

If Rosita could be induced to play Katie's part, success would be certain. She had all the things that Katie lacked—beauty, charm, a certain sadness of expression that would appeal to such a man as his intended victim. Moreover, he had found out that Rosita had entered Dawson in Conlan's company. That was a very important fact, for it might disarm any possible suspicion. The flaws which Katie would bring into the scheme would not exist if Rosita would take her place.

He went into his office to think the thing over. That Rosita would not lend herself to such a scheme was obvious, unless he could use some kind of compulsion. True, he had a certain amount of power over her and could threaten to make her life a misery, but he knew her sufficiently well to realize the futility of violence.

Yet between him and all this money was the conscience of a foolish girl. It exasperated him. For two hours he wracked his brains, drinking heavily all the time. The fiery spirit had the effect of removing some of the obstacles. He began to saddle Rosita with some of his own cupidity. Surely she could not resist a fortune—a vast sum of money that would enable her to leave the country next spring and have all she wanted in life. He knew that her one dominating desire was to be free of him and to get back to California. It was wonderful what half a bottle of whisky could achieve.

He saw himself as a demigod dictating his wishes to a crawling slave. Yes;

Rosita should do this if he had to whip her into consenting. Confound the girl! Had not he kept her for the past six months? What would have become of her in Dawson but for his charity and generosity?

"Gus!" he roared.

The shock-headed boy poked his face around the door.

"Find Rosita and tell her to come here!"

Rosita appeared a few minutes later. Mannering was most effusive—far too effusive for her liking. After some ridiculous flattery he put to her the scheme. Amazement was on her face, but, as he continued, the germ of an idea came to her. It was promising enough to keep in subjection the horror and revulsion which she felt toward this brute. It was certain that if she refused he would not give up the attempt to make gain out of Jim's plight. There were other women in Dawson who could fill such a part. Jim was evidently in great danger.

True, she might be able to warn him, but there was the possibility that if she refused, Mannering would take steps to prevent even this. No; it required more than a refusal to stop this cruel plot from being carried out. It was necessary for some one to be with him, to turn the knife that was directed at his heart. Moreover, there was a chance of leaving this dreadful saloon and of saving him from the drink fiend which seemed to be exercising more and more control over him. When she had fulfilled the latter hope, she could tell him the truth.

"Think of it, Rosita—a fortune!"

"It—it is a dreadful risk."

"I am only asking you to marry him."

"If it were not for the bloodshed I think——"

"There is no need for any violence. You know this man. He is fast drinking himself to death. It is not your fault if he ends his life that way, nor

is it mine. This loss of memory is the result of drink. That blow on the head had little to do with it. A man like that is better out of the way."

Rosita's blood boiled at the remark, but she was wary enough not to show it. "I—I can't do it," she said. "It is quite out of the question."

"If you don't, I'll put you out on the street. What could you do in Dawson this time of the year, with half the people away on the trail? Even a dancing girl is not wanted now. But why should we quarrel, Rosita? Our interests are identical. You want to get out of the Klondike, and so do I. You can wring money out of him without having to be his widow. You've got a way about you that is sure to appeal to him. After you have married him you can cut up rough, and he'll settle a big sum on you. He is that kind of a fool."

It required all Rosita's self-control to remain calm in the face of this insulting suggestion. She saw now exactly what Mannering thought of her, placing her in the same category as Katie. It merely hardened her resolution to beat him at his own game.

"I must have time to think it over."

"There is no time. He is starting away to-morrow morning. I have told him you are in the hotel."

"If—if I agree, will you swear not to harm him, provided I can make him pay up without?"

"Yes. I should prefer it that way."

"Very well! I will do it."

His eyes brightened, and he gripped her hand. To her it was like the touch of a serpent.

"Now we will put it into writing."

"No," she gasped. "It would be madness."

"It would be sound sense. What claim shall I have——"

"You think I should not pay you—your share?"

"It is always best to conduct business along the approved lines. You needn't

worry. I am not fool enough to let any one have a sight of it."

He seized a pen and wrote a short agreement to the effect that in consideration of services rendered, Rosita Mannering agreed to pay Daniel Mannering a moiety of any sum of money received by her within a period of twelve months from that date.

"That's innocent enough, ain't it? It just puts you and me on the level."

"There was no need——"

"Sign it!" he ordered.

She did so very reluctantly. It was the part of the business she disliked most, but it was obvious that he would not listen to any alternative, and she feared that he would enlist outside aid if she remained obstinate.

"You be ready in the morning," he said. "I'm going to have a shot at prospecting myself."

She knew what this meant. He was not satisfied in leaving things in her hands. All the while he would be near, watching and waiting for an opportunity to bring about his ends swiftly. If drink did not kill Jim something else would.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO THE MAGIC NORTH.

WHEN Rosita reached her room she was trembling with excitement. It was going to be a straight fight between herself and Mannering, for the life of a man she admired immensely, despite the weakness which for some unknown reason he displayed no great desire to overcome.

Later Mannering discovered that Jim had left the saloon, but he knew where the camp was and walked up there somewhat apprehensively. He found Jim sitting beside the fire smoking reflectively.

"I found you were gone," he explained. "And as I had told your wife that you would see her in the morning——"

"That's all right. My dogs wanted feeding. I'll be right along at sunrise."

How Jim had managed to find the camp was a mystery to Mannering, but he put no importance on this, for it was not unlikely that instinct might have led him to it.

"A good dog that," he said, pointing to Slick.

"Yep; my leader. He'll shake out the creases in them other animals. My —my wife knows I'm hitting for the digging?"

"Of course!"

"Yep; of course! Dunno what made me ask that."

Mannering knew and smiled to himself. The barometer seemed to be "set fair" so far as his scheme was concerned. It was evident that he had summed up Rosita very well. Life in the saloon had knocked some of the nonsense out of her. In any case he felt fortified by having her signature in his possession. It needed but a slight alteration of the wording to make her culpable of more than mere connivance to robbery. No; Mannering took no risks.

"Maybe I'll see you on the trail," he said. "There isn't much doing in Dawson just now, and I wouldn't object to striking a bit of metal myself."

Meanwhile Rosita was preparing for the great adventure, and she was surprised to find with what joy she welcomed it. She knew it must entail suffering, for the winter was now setting in, and soon life outside a steam-heated room would be arduous enough. What happened on a stampede she did not know, but she had heard of the horrors of the big Californian strike, as well as those of the later Klondike discovery. But nothing could be much worse than her life at the Aurora.

Had it been any other man but Jim Conlan she might have had qualms, but there was something about him that won her trust. Drinker as he was, never on

any occasion had a foul remark left his lips. Under the granite composition of the man was the born gentleman. But the part she was to play was going to be difficult all the same. Once she thought seriously of confessing the truth to him at the outstart, but she persuaded herself that to do this would prevent her from gaining all her ends, which were not only to foil Mannering in his foul plot, but to stop Jim from sinking into the mire.

She lacked the necessary clothing for such a trip as was contemplated, but, having no money to buy thicker raiment, and hating to accept anything from Mannering, she made the best of the situation and packed everything she possessed into a large canvas bag. Sleep that night was out of the question. Most of the time she sat at the window waiting for the reluctant dawn.

Mannering called her just as the light began to steal over the snow-clad landscape. Downstairs she found a good breakfast waiting. She forced herself to eat it, knowing that she would need ample food if she was going to survive the ordeal. She had just finished when Mannering came in with a smile on his sinister face.

"He's here," he said.

Rosita's heart began to beat faster. Suppose he recognized her? No; that was impossible. Mannering had sworn it.

"I'm ready," she quavered. "Ask him in."

Jim entered the room and stood a few yards from her, twisting his foxskin cap in his big hands. Mannering was about to leave them together when Jim remembered an important point.

He sidled up to Mannering. "Her—name?" he whispered.

"Rosita." Then in a loud voice he added: "I hope you'll be successful, Conlan."

Jim found himself alone gazing at the "wife" he had only just discovered.

"I guess you wondered what had become of me—Rosita?" he said.

"Mannering told me you had an accident," she replied. "Are you better now?"

"Sure! Is the bill paid here?"

She nodded.

"Waal, we'd better hit the trail. All them fellows have got twenty-four hours' start on us. Can't allow them that much. They'll sure grab everything worth having. Is that your grip?"

He pointed to the canvas sack, and she inclined her head. The sack was swept up from the floor as if it were a feather. Putting on her coat, she passed by him and emerged into the street.

Outside she found a long sled to which were harnessed four dogs. Three of them were Eskimo huskies, but the leader was the fine Labrador retriever which she had seen on the night when she first encountered Jim. She approached the dog and patted him on the back.

"How do you do, Slick?" she asked.

It was a fortunate remark, for it reached Jim's ears. Moreover, Slick remembered her, which was more than his master did.

"I bought the others two days ago," said Jim. "They ain't much to look at, but I guess they'll stand the cold better than Slick will. Say, Rosita, even now I'm wondering whether you had better come on this trip with me."

"Why not?"

"It's going to be fair hell. I've never seen the winter settle in so hard. If you'd rather stay at the hotel——"

"I am coming," she broke in determinedly. "You may need me."

He concluded that she knew more about him than he did himself. It was a queer situation, but he was forced to make the best of it. He kept stealing glances at her as he rearranged the things in the sled, and in his glances there was unconcealed admiration.

It seemed to him that she was a trifle cold, but there might easily be reason for that. Suddenly her glance fell on a big stone jar in the rear of the sled. She knew what it was, and her mouth moved nervously. He had not forgotten to bring with him the old poison.

"Jump in and make yourself comfortable," he said. "That ain't much of a coat you've got, Rosita. Have to trade you another later on. You'll need it."

She took the place which he had prepared for her, and he wrapped a thick rug around her, tucking it securely under her legs. Then he took the reins and cracked the long whip over the dogs' backs.

"Mush!"

A straining of muscles and away went the team down the smooth-frozen street. A few people waved their hands as they passed, and Dawson rapidly slid away behind them. There was no need to look up the route for Ogilvie, for there were two deep and wide tracks in the snow where the runners of hundreds of sleds had gone, and in the center was another track worn by the feet of dogs and human beings.

In half an hour all signs of civilization had disappeared. They were amid stunted timber with their faces to the magic North. The gold strike lay nearly two hundred miles away, and between it and them was nothing but desolation, broken at intervals by similar adventurers. Verily the quest for gold was an arduous business, and all the more so when a man and a woman were flung together by such circumstances as these two were.

"Look!" said Jim. "Ain't that fine!"

It was a vast range of peaks across the sky line, illumined by the low-lying sun. She echoed his admiration, for the sight brought a feeling of veneration to her. Yes; this was better than the soul-searing dance room at the Aurora. Whatever might happen up there

in the silent North she was glad she had come with him. Life was beginning to sound a new note.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST CLASH.

IT was long past sunset when they pitched their camp, for Jim had been determined to cover twenty miles before sleeping. This in the circumstances was a prodigious achievement, and had been made possible only by his manhandling the sled on the frequent bad stretches to assist the laboring dogs. Once only they had halted to take food and feed the animals, and then for barely a quarter of an hour.

Already they had overhauled several outfits, but the main procession was still well ahead. Jim thought he would reach them on the third day. Away from the temptations of Dawson he seemed a different man. His eyes were brighter, and at times he laughed deeply. But Rosita remembered the presence of the stone jar and wondered.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No."

"Good! Say, Rosita, I got something to confess."

She started slightly and looked at him.

"Something queer happened to me two days ago. I clean lost my memory. It's a good thing Mannering happened to mention you, or I'd never have known I had a wife."

"Perhaps you had rather you had not?"

"I—I wouldn't like to say that. But did you guess what had happened to me?"

"Why—why do you ask that?"

"Well, you don't seem very surprised."

"It is because—because—— Jim, it was the drink. It was almost bound to come to this—or worse."

"I see; you kinder expected it. Looks

as if I must have been a pretty good soaker. Maybe that is why you went to the hotel to live?"

She let silence give assent, for she hated to lie to him directly.

"It's queer," he mused. "Queer to find you—like a stranger, and to find myself that kind of dog."

"No, no!" she replied. "You were always kind—and considerate. Even if we have never been—much to each other——"

"Never been!"

"Not of late," she corrected. "Why—why do you give way to drinking? In every other way you are strong willed, and yet——"

"It wasn't the drink," he interrupted, "I had a knock on the head that might have been serious. In a country like this I guess a fellow needs some kind of stimulant."

"It turns you into a brute."

"How long have we been married, Rosita?"

The unexpected question embarrassed her. "Don't ask me. I don't wish to remember."

His mouth twitched, and she knew that she had hurt him deeply, but hurting him seemed inevitable if she was to succeed in her object.

"You're young," he said in a low, tense voice. "Young and mighty good-looking, Rosita. Yet you've stuck to me though presumably I ain't worth sticking to."

"I have never said that."

"No; but you mean it. Let us get this thing sorted out while I'm sober. I guess that between you and me there's a kind of abyss, eh? It ain't possible that you could love me still?"

"No," she faltered. "Jim, let us be frank. I have come with you to be your comrade. I'll take the good with the bad, but there can be nothing more—nothing. You understand?"

"Of course! You couldn't speak fairer than that. Maybe this lapse of

memory is a good thing in disguise. It will start us off fresh—as comrades, and it lets me forget what——”

She looked at him interrogatively.

“——what I have lost,” he added simply.

The deep voice thrilled her strangely. She was beginning to realize the difficulties before her, but she was glad that she had that opportunity to make the situation clear. Fear she had none. Instinctively she knew she was dealing with a white man, and to be his comrade was a good thing.

“You are tired,” she said. “You have worked hard to-day. Look, even the dogs are exhausted.”

“We’ll have to do more to-morrow,” he replied. “I’m pretty used to hard going. Rosita, I’ve got to hit the stuff at Ogilvie, and that is why we must hustle some.”

“Is it so necessary?”

“Sure! You ought to know. I’ve got nothing in my wallet but a hundred dollars. And then there is you. I’d like to be able to fix you up comfortably. This kind of wandering life is good enough for a man maybe, but mighty hard on a woman.”

She took this to mean that he considered any chance of rehabilitation out of the question and was keen only to make amends for the past. It brought tears to her eyes to reflect that so far from owing her it was the reverse.

“You mustn’t think about me—too much,” she said.

“Can’t help it when you are close beside me. Have we always done this sort of thing, Rosita?”

“You mean this roving life?”

“Yep.”

“Mostly! But let us not dwell on the past. It is the future that matters now.”

“Sure it is, but the future and the past are mighty like one piece. I wouldn’t be surprised if this stampede was a washout. Half of them are.”

“How do you know that?”

“Dunno. It’s a kind of instinct. Memory’s a queer thing—a sort of combination of habits and impressions. I seem to have lost the impressions, but the habits cling.”

This was indeed the case. The little tricks which experience had taught him were his still. The whole process of getting gold was as clear to him as the camp fire. Though he could not remember a single occasion on which he had dug for gold, he was aware that he was an old hand at the game. It was the same with mushing the dogs and setting up camp. Instincts and habits outdid memory.

“Is a woman allowed to stake a claim?” she asked.

“Sure! If she is over eighteen; you’re more than that, ain’t you?”

She inclined her head without thinking and added: “I’m nearly twenty-one.”

“Not twenty-one, and we’ve been married how long?”

“Never mind. What does it matter? Soon you will get your memory back, and everything will be clear.”

“Waal, I can’t say I’ll be glad exactly when that happens,” he mused.

“Why not?”

“Maybe I’d learn things that ain’t pleasant to know. It’s pretty clear to me that I’ve made a terrible hash of your life. I might even discover that I had ill-treated you—beaten you——”

“Jim!”

“Ain’t it ever been as bad as that?”

“No, no! You—you couldn’t do a thing like that. But why do you continue to harp on painful things?”

“I’ll try not to, if it displeases you, Rosita. It was mighty good of you to come on this trip with me. We’ll be pals as you suggested—just pals.”

“Yes. Friendship is worth something, isn’t it?”

“More than anything else, I guess, and it takes a country like this to prove it.”

"Tell me what happens when one stakes a claim?" she asked, anxious to stop his questions.

He rubbed his chin reflectively and then shook his head. "Blast if I know!"

"You can't remember?"

"Nope! But I've a feeling I'll know just what to do when I start work. It was the same with them dawgs. If you had asked me how to fix them up to the sled I couldn't have told you, but I did it without thinking."

"Perhaps you ought to have let a doctor attend to the wound in your head?"

"That's all right. It's healing fine."

"Let me see it."

He removed his cap and pointed to an obvious swelling under the thick hair. She could see nothing, but when she tenderly touched the spot with her fingers she saw him wince.

"It hurts still?"

"I can just feel it; that's all," he prevaricated.

In truth he was as hard as granite. The head wound was enough to keep any normal man in bed for a week, but he refused to let it interfere with his plans. Though she mentally reproved him for his stubbornness, she admired him all the more for the fierce, indomitable spirit that moved him and wondered yet again that so magnificent a man could let drink frequently become his master.

"You must look after yourself, Jim," she said seriously.

"I sure do!" He laughed. "I've a whole horde of little devils watching over me. At times they tickle me, and then I see red. They must have tickled me two nights back at the Aurora. I wonder whose life it was I wanted?"

"I know whose life it was that nearly passed," she said severely. "For my sake, Jim, you must take care."

"Does it matter very much to you?"

His penetrating blue eyes were fixed intently on her face. Already this mis-

representation was leading her into strange fields of fancy. She blushed and hung her head.

"You do care—as a pal?"

"Yes; as your comrade."

"Right-o! We'll leave it at that. Now it's time you went to bed, for your eyes are heavy with sleep. I'll show you how I have fixed up the tent. It's really a one-man affair, but I reckon it'll serve."

He went inside and lighted the lantern. She peeped in and saw a canvas partition fastened to the top and reaching to the ground. It was noticeable that most of the blankets and rugs were on one side of this.

"It ain't really cold yet," he said. "The main thing is to keep your feet warm. I've a couple of sleeping bags, but we won't need them yet. Will it do?"

She inclined her head and blessed him for his thoughtfulness and generosity. This was the man whom Mannering had held up to her as being a dissolute, worthless drunkard, fit only to be robbed of his money! It ill became Mannering to cast aspersions upon the lowest of living creatures, but when it came to men like Colorado Jim!

"Aren't you tired too?" she asked.

"A bit, but I like a pipe before I turn in."

"Very well! Good night, Jim!"

"Good night, Rosita!"

He held out his hand, and she took it a little nervously. The big fingers closed over hers until they almost hurt. Then he released her and turned away with a curious little sigh.

When she was tucked away under the blankets she recapitulated the incidents of the past few days, and the more she pondered over them the more pleased she was that she had taken that bold course. Not to have done so would have been to let him pursue his unsteady course toward a deeper downfall and perhaps to let him walk into the net.

Through a narrow slit in the canvas she could see him sitting by the fire, blowing smoke into the dry, cold air, and stretched near him was the dog to which he was so deeply attached. It was like spying to watch him thus, unobserved, but she found it difficult to keep her head averted. Despite the hardness of his face it was an eloquent instrument of his emotions. The leaping flames of the fire revealed the storm and cloud that were passing over the fine features. Whether he was looking backward or forward she did not know, but she thought forward, for a blank mind could not give rise to such troubled expressions.

She turned her head around and determined to sleep. A few minutes later she heard the unmistakable noise of a drawn cork and looked through the slit to see him pouring some spirit from the stone jar. So much for her appeal! As he had said, the old habits lived yet. He drank the stuff at one gulp and sat looking at the jar for a minute or two; then he laughed softly and took another drink.

Again and again it happened until she could stand the sight no longer. Driven by an impulse which she could not fight against, she wrapped a blanket around her and emerged from the tent. "Jim!"

He looked up and saw her, and his mouth shut like a trap.

"I—I couldn't help hearing—and seeing. Have you no—no consideration?"

"What's wrong?" he growled.

"Everything is wrong. Do you want me to hate you?"

"I thought you did already—in a mild way."

Her eyes flashed angrily at this. "Is that all you have to say?" she demanded.

"What more? See here, Rosita; you mustn't fly off the handle so easily. What wrong is there in a man having a drink?"

"A drink! Pints of it! To you it is poison. When I look at you now I see

not the real Jim Conlan but a weak-minded, soulless creature that has taken his place. For that thing I have nothing but contempt."

He uttered a low growl of resentment and moved toward her. But she eluded him and stepped back into the tent. For a few seconds he stood perfectly still, gazing at the flap through which she had disappeared. Then he walked to the fire and, lighting his pipe, again stared up at the frosty stars.

CHAPTER X.

TAKING A BIG CHANCE.

JIM'S determination to overhaul the main party of prospectors was realized on the third day, but it was brought about only by a feat as hazardous as any that Rosita had ever dreamed of. On the second day they passed several small parties, all heading for the magic Eldorado. Among these were several women who had joined their husbands in order to stake a claim for themselves, and in one case there was a baby of not more than a year old.

"What a terrible shame!" exclaimed Rosita.

"Pretty bad!" agreed Jim. "But maybe them two are hungering to get out of Alaska and can't let this chance go by."

"They could have left that child at home."

"Might have been worse off there than here."

It was a habit of his to find excuses for persons, and although she admired him for this, she felt enraged at the woman for risking the life of her infant on such an expedition.

The trail now followed the edge of a ravine running at right angles to their real line of progress. Far away in the clear distance Rosita could see several outfits apparently making toward them on the other side of the ravine.

"Do we turn back down there?" she asked.

"Looks like it. I'll have a peep at the map."

He unfolded it and found the route. It was evident that the direction lay right across the ravine and that the only crossing place was eight miles to the east, making a total detour of sixteen miles which at their average rate of going meant about five hours. Putting away the map he stood on the dizzy edge of the ravine and looked down. It was little more than a wide fissure in the ground, both walls of which were almost perpendicular. It widened and narrowed alternately and at its narrowest point was not more than twenty feet across. But its depth was tremendous, and it made Rosita dizzy to stand within a yard of the edge.

"Runs right across," mused Jim. "Straight as a knife edge."

His glance wandered to the lean line of pines on the bluff above him, and he pursed his lips as he thought he saw a way to save several hours' toil.

"We'll have a bite of food here," he said; "and let them other outfits pass."

She looked at him swiftly, not quite understanding his remark. But he made no effort to enlighten her. Since the incident of the previous night there had been a little coldness between them. Half an hour later the last of the stragglers had gone by. Jim hastily struck camp.

"Are we going on now?" she asked.

"We're going over."

"Over—the ravine?"

"Sure! You stay here while I fix things."

She watched him take a gleaming ax blade from the sled and fit it into the long haft. Then he mounted the slope and made for the line of pines. With his coat off he attacked the first one. She saw the splinters flying and was amazed at the rapidity with which he felled it. Another followed and then another. In less than an hour six long logs were lying on the snow, shorn of their branches.

To push them down the gradient was no very difficult task, and soon the half dozen were lying close to the precipice. Exerting all his strength, Jim raised one of them vertically and let it fall across the chasm, but the top broke on impact with the ground, and the log went hurtling into the depths.

"Rotten luck!" he muttered. "Have to use the strongest."

The second effort was successful. The log fell clean, with some three feet projecting over the abyss. To Rosita's horror Jim swarmed across this after tying a rope to the end of another log. Once on the other side the second log was hauled into position. He walked across the bridge and fixed the rope again. Ultimately he had the five logs side by side, forming a bridge of about four feet in width. On this he placed some snow and, having wedged the ends into a secure position, came over to her.

"We've gained three hours, I guess."

"Are—are you going to take the sled over that?" she gasped.

"That's the idea. Curious these other fellows never thought of it!"

To her it was not in the least curious. She dared not look at the crazy thing without feeling giddy, and yet he seemed as cool as if he was contemplating a stroll along a boulevard.

"They'll hold all right," he said. "You needn't worry."

She wanted to tell him that her heart quailed at the very thought of crossing that perilous bridge, that her nerves already seemed to be out of control, but the steady eyes held a challenge.

"You ain't scared?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm frightened out of my life."

"You needn't be. I'll steady the sled from behind. There's good dry snow for the dogs' feet and six inches to spare either side of the runners."

Six inches! He spoke as if there were six feet. She watched him slew the sled around and plant it in line with the improvised bridge.

"There won't be a hitch," he said in an encouraging voice. "We'll be across in twenty seconds. You'd better sit in the sled if——"

"No."

"It's safer."

"I'm going to walk—like you."

The words amazed her as much as they did him. Where the source of this new strength lay she did not know, but suddenly it had come. She believed that she was going to her death, but she preferred that to spiritual defeat. He had expected her to sit in the sled and cover her eyes during the awful passage, and because he expected that there came the obsessive desire to prove herself a worthy comrade.

"You—you mean that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes. I am ready."

Still he hesitated. "See here, Rosita——" he began.

"Please start," she pleaded. "We—we are wasting time."

"Very well."

He made a noise with his lips, and Slick stretched his strong legs. The other dogs followed, and the sled moved. It ran straight onto the bridge. Jim turned and held out his hand to Rosita. She caught it involuntarily, but quickly let it go.

"I will do it—alone," she said.

As a triumph of spirit over matter it was indeed a magnificent example. Though she knew it was foolish to look below, an irresistible impulse brought her head down when she was in the center of the bridge. She got a vision of tremendous depths, with jagged rocks at the bottom projecting from a half-frozen stream. Everything seemed to swim around, and for a second she believed that she was on the verge of falling. But she brought her head up with a jerk and set her eyes fixedly on the back of Jim's coat. Foot by foot she made the crossing and ultimately set her feet on the ground again.

Jim turned immediately and caught her by the shoulders. "You're the goods, Rosita," he said tensely. "You scared me stiff. I didn't mean you to foot it like that. There is not one woman in a hundred who would have done it."

"I—I was terribly frightened," she admitted. "But I wanted to conquer the fear. I have always been nervous of great depths. Thank God it is all over!"

He gulped in nervous fashion, and she smiled to realize that her adopted "husband" had suffered from nerves almost as badly as she had, though the cause of them was different.

"We've saved three hours at least," he said. "I guess we'll be on their trail before sundown."

This proved to be true. A few hours later they mounted a long slope and looked down the other side to see a long black string of travelers not far ahead.

"The stampede!" said Jim. "A mighty mixed lot, I'll wager. It's going to be rough up here, Rosita. All the wild seeds get mixed up in gold strikes. Some of 'em ain't above shooting a man off his claim and restaking it for themselves. Gold's a marvelous thing for upsetting a fellow's mental balance."

CHAPTER XI.

LIKE A POISONED WIND.

LONG shadows fell onto the snow, and with the vanishing sun came queer rainbow illuminations in the northern sky. The freezing night came down, but still the procession went on. Jim passed some of the stragglers—a woebegone crowd, some trudging it and others using inferior dog teams. The better outfits were ahead.

"Trying to reach timber for camping," explained Jim. "We're pretty high up just here, and it wouldn't be a picnic to camp on that plateau, for there's a lot of wind coming."

How he knew this she could not think, for at the moment there was no sign of wind. But half an hour later an ice-cold gust drove into their faces, and it proved to be the forerunner of worse things. They reached the black fringe of timber to find it studded with camp fires, and everywhere were hunched forms, eating, talking, or erecting shields against the increasing bitter blast.

As Jim had said they were a mixed community. The larger proportion of them were born adventurers, men of every nationality in whom the gambling spirit was strong. A large number of these had been left over from the last gold strike and had managed by some means or other to make a livelihood. A few were genuine workers from the businesses around Dawson, who saw in prospect the possibility of release from their labors and a rose-strewn bed for the remainder of their existence.

It was too dark for Rosita to take in much, and moreover Jim was keen to find a piece of cover removed from the main groups. When he had done this to his satisfaction it began to snow. Despite the fairly thick timber, the knife-edged wind came through, and the fine snow particles beat on their faces like pieces of flint. For the first time since leaving Dawson, Rosita really felt the cold. It was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering, and there was a numbed feeling about her feet.

"Rough weather coming," said Jim.

"I thought it was already here," she returned with an effort to laugh.

"This! This ain't nothing. When the real wind comes it makes noises like ten thousand wild devils, and to try to face it would be like offering your face to a flame. But you're shivering! Here, take this while I cut some wood."

He slipped off his thick fur coat and buttoned it over her own thinner garb. While he hacked at branches, she dis-

tributed some food to the dogs. They consumed it almost before it reached the snow and came yelping for more, fighting for it when it was given. Slick, however, did not join in the m \acute{e} l \acute{e} e. Jim had trained him how to behave. When a frozen fish came his way he took it and made it clear to the huskies that he regarded it as his personal property, and none of the three dogs came within a yard of him.

"You're a good dog, Slick," she said. "And for your pride and self-control you shall be rewarded. Come here!"

He came close to her and took a meaty bone from her fingers as delicately as a woman might have taken a bouquet from her lover. Nor did he eat it immediately, but crouched on his haunches with it close to his paws, looking in the direction in which Jim had gone. The noise of chopping reached his ears, and he inclined his big head to one side.

"It's Jim," whispered Rosita. "Your master!"

At this he became excited and, leaving the bone, ran across the snow uttering low "woofs."

Jim came to view with his arms full of small wood. "Now we'll get a fire going," he said. "The greatest thing that ever happened in this world was when our great-grandfathers found out how to make a blaze. Guess that created a stir among the tribe!"

"It must have done if they lived in this country," she replied. "I can't help thinking of those people back there. I saw a woman of over sixty years of age with a man who looked even older. Why do they come on such a journey?"

"Gold mad," he answered. "After all, it's not difficult to understand. Money can take the place of lots of human virtues. With money a man can buy power. With power he can become as a god. Look at the happiness that old couple can get with ten thousand dollars. Maybe it would last them to

the end of their days. And they'd sure win the respect of their neighbors where now they're treated like dirt, I've no doubt. It's mighty easy to moralize about the superiority of the spirit, but when a man's belly aches it takes more than a sermon to stop it."

"That sounds crude, Jim. You don't really believe that money is the end of all desire?"

"Maybe not," he murmured. "But then I ain't normal."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Waal, I'm a bit like a wild animal, I guess. It gives me no pleasure to have anything that I haven't fought for. When money comes easy it ain't worth having."

"Doesn't this gold-strike money come easily?"

"Sometimes!"

"You're a walking contradiction, Jim, for you are after the easy money."

"Yep," he replied. "So I am."

Rosita had a feeling, however, that it was not so, and that his former object had been adventure—a change from the monotony of life in Dawson; perhaps something more—an effort to escape from painful memories from which he was now temporarily relieved. But with her coming the incentive had changed. He was going to join the fight for gold for her!

Together they wrestled with the tent, which again and again was torn from their hands by the wind. At last Jim succeeded in driving in the long steel pegs, and though the canvas bellied like a balloon the fastenings held. By this time the fire was blazing merrily, and the kettle was boiling. The fried beans and bacon seemed the most savory of meals, and she ate heartily to Jim's satisfaction.

"You'll need the sleeping bag to-night," he said. "And I'll get you a warmer coat somehow. Hark at them fellows down below!"

The noise to which he drew her atten-

tion was a tremendous outbreak of guffawing, interspersed with awful cursing and shrill cries.

"Some card game, I guess," he mused.

Suddenly a shot rang out, followed immediately by two other reports and a piercing scream.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"Trouble. I think I'll run along. It's no business of mine, but a fellow can't let a crowd of people murder each other."

"Yes, yes! But take care!"

"Sure! Maybe I'll be in time to pick up the pieces."

The noise continued long after he had gone. It sounded as if half the camp was engaged in warfare against the other half. There were more revolver shots and screams that even the wailing wind could not drown. She hoped that Jim would not get drawn into it and waited anxiously for him to return.

A quarter of an hour passed, and suddenly she saw a form emerge from the darkness. It was covered with snow and, unlike Jim, wore a long Mackinaw coat and woolen cap. The man stepped from the shadow beyond the illuminated circle, and the flickering flames fell on his face.

"Mannering!" she exclaimed.

"Good evening, Rosita! I guessed I'd find you somewhere about here. Where's your—husband?"

The girl stood up and met the cruel eyes of the man she feared most in the world. His coming was like a poisonous wind. It brought home to her the actualities of her position.

CHAPTER XII.

A DIVE INTO THE DEPTHS.

WELL?" said Mannering, stepping over to Rosita. "Are you dumb?"

"N-no," she stammered. "You surprised me. I did not expect you so—soon."

"Conlan is not the only man who can make the going. But I'll admit he put up a good pace. Where is he now?"

"Gone yonder. There is a dreadful quarrel on. Shots were fired, and it sounded as if some one was hurt."

"It is only some rough crowd. They're laying into each other good and well. How are things going?"

"Quite well."

"Good! He swallowed the yarn pretty well. But you'll have to watch your step closely. Ruff and that boy are about here somewhere. Has he shown any signs of suspicion since you have been on the trail?"

"No. He remembers nothing."

"Play up to him well, Rosita. If he shows the slightest suspicion give me the hint. From now onward I'll be close on your heels."

She shuddered slightly as she interpreted his meaning. It was clear to her that he would have no hesitation in putting an end to Jim's existence if Jim showed signs of recovering his memory, and taking his chance of her being able to wring some money out of his victim before the breath left his body. It required all her self-control not to tell him there and then what she thought of him.

"I know just what to do," she said.

There was no time for further instructions as Jim suddenly came to view. He halted before Mannering and welcomed him with a nod.

"I guessed I'd find my niece somewhere in camp," said Mannering.

"Niece!" Jim looked at Rosita sharply and then covered up his surprise. "Yep; of course! I guess you have just arrived?"

"Half an hour ago. I've been hard at it since daybreak. Luckily some one had put a bridge across the ravine—a hair-raising sort of thing that I wouldn't go over again for all the gold on Ogilvie."

Jim laughed softly. "I built that,"

he said. "It put me three hours up on them others."

"Did Rosita cross that thing?"

"You bet she did! So you're after staking a claim?"

"I am. I staked one in '98, but all I struck was muck. This time I hope I'll be more successful."

"Depends on how many fellows there are ahead," said Jim. "I made a few inquiries and was told that there are over a hundred farther up, led by two fire eaters—a man named Ruff and his partner."

Mannering shot Rosita a glance which Jim missed. From the remark it was clear that Jim never guessed Ruff was an old friend, nor that it was on his partner's behalf that Jim had received his injury. Mannering's strength lay in the fact that Jim was supersensitive on the matter of his mental lapse and was not likely to let Ruff know. He decided to drop a little information for Jim.

"I thought Ruff was going to wait for you," he said.

"Why should he?"

"Well, I heard him say that you and him were going together. I suppose he reckoned you were knocked out for good and that young devil Cannan persuaded him to get a move on."

"Maybe that," agreed Jim, who gathered from this that he and Ruff were old friends. "On a game like this it is every man for himself. You can't blame Ruff for wanting to stake a good patch."

They talked for a few minutes longer, and then Mannering notified his intention of turning in for the night and left Jim and Rosita together.

"So he's your uncle?" inquired Jim.

"Yes."

"I never knew that."

"You did before your memory went."

"Did I? And then there's this fellow Ruff. I'm glad he put me wise about Ruff. A lost memory's sure like a disease. I wouldn't like them other fellows to know. Was I very thick with Ruff?"

"Yes—in the past. But until he met you in Dawson he had not seen you for some years."

"And the other chap—his partner?"

"Cannan? He is a young man—a wild boy. It was through him that you got into trouble, Jim."

"How is that?"

"Mannering tried to swindle him one night at the Aurora, and you interfered. Mannering hates him."

"I see. That was how I got biffed. See here, Rosita, that uncle of yours is a queer sort of cuss. He acts as if he was mighty friendly, but if I interfered between him and Cannan it follows that he can't love me like a brother."

"That is true, Jim. I want to warn you against Mannering. He bears you nothing but ill will. You must take care of yourself up here. If there is a chance he—he——"

Her hands were trembling under her deep emotion. Though at present she did not wish to tell him the truth about herself, some kind of warning was opportune.

Jim wrinkled his brows. "That's queer. I had a notion he wasn't straight. Waal, you needn't worry none, Rosita. If he starts any high kicking maybe I can put a spoke in his wheel. You think he's hankering to put one over on me for lending a hand to this fellow Cannan?"

"I know it. Don't underrate him, Jim. Though he is my uncle, he is all that is bad. They used to call him 'Two-Gun' Mannering before he became respectable and ran the Aurora. Beneath his smirking smile he hates you and is capable of murder."

"A nice kind of relative," Jim mused. "Thanks for telling me that, Rosita. It's as well to know where one stands. But if he starts anything rough maybe he'll find he can't finish it."

"Nevertheless you must take care. I would not fear for you if he would meet you in the open as man to man, but that

is not like him. There is a reason why he wants to harm you——"

"Another reason apart from that bust-up?"

"Yes."

"What other reason?"

"Don't ask me now. One day I will tell you. Jim, whatever happens you must trust me. Whatever you may hear, whatever people may say, you must not doubt me. This man Mannering has been an evil influence in my life. I am afraid of him—terribly afraid!"

"You talk strangely, Rosita," Jim said kindly. "But while I am here you needn't worry about this fine uncle of yours. We'll deal with him when the time arrives."

Feeling that she had said enough, if not too much, she went to bed soon after, leaving Jim to ponder over her strange words and stranger attitude.

When he had racked his brains in vain for a solution, he set Slick as guard over the gear and went to do a little business with the campers who now possessed one more coat than was necessary, after the night's shooting. Higgins, the wizened leader of the party, was not averse to parting with his dead brother's apparel, but the coat was a good one, and he wanted food in exchange for it and not cash. This Jim blankly refused to consider, and after a great deal of haggling the garment changed hands for sixty dollars.

Rosita was awakened to find it still dark and blowing hard. There was already a stir in camp, for each party was trying to steal a march on its neighbors. That Jim had been drinking again she knew by the position of the whisky jar, which she had hidden overnight under some firewood, but apart from a drawn look he showed no sign of it.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Yes. Did you?"

"Not so badly. You'd better stick to that coat of mine now. I shall not be needing it."

She saw that he was wearing a new one and wondered where he had picked it up, but he did not volunteer the information since the details were unnecessary.

"I've some needles and thread," he said. "Maybe you could alter it a bit—take a few feet out of the back and shorten the arms. It will be warmer with a closer fit."

She was glad to accept the garment, for the cold was now intense. The heavy tweed coat which would have been proof against normal cold seemed no thicker than a veil in this bitter wind. Mitts were strung from the shoulders of Jim's late garment. They were of enormous size—more like muffs than gloves—and she could not help laughing as she tried them on.

"Thirty below!" said Jim, looking at the thermometer that was attached to the sled. "Not bad for a December morning."

"Does it ever get colder?"

"That ain't cold for Alaska. It's possible for it to go to sixty below. Then it's sure dangerous, and if there's a breath of wind it's wiser to stay under cover."

It was not long before they were on the trail again, with the cruel wind in their faces. The going was hard, for the new snow had filled in the runner tracks and slowed down the sled. In places there were deep drifts into which the dogs' legs sank up to their haunches, and frequent stops had to be made.

"Much more of this snow and there'll be a whole lot who'll never see Ogilvie," he said. "We're doing well, but we ain't overhauled that fellow Ruff yet."

"He had a big start and is almost as pugnacious as you, Jim."

"But the other fellow's a chechahco, ain't he?"

"A what?"

"A newcomer—a greenhorn."

"Cannan is new to Alaska," she replied. "But he is as hard as a piece of

steel. If either one of those two breaks down, it won't be Cannan."

"Sounds an interesting sort of boy."

"He is," she returned shortly.

When the light grew better, Rosita looked back and saw a solitary team in the far distance. It was not one of the outfits which they had recently passed, for it was hauled by eight big huskies and was making great headway.

"Some one overhauling us?" inquired Jim.

"Yes."

He turned his head and his keen eyes recognized the musher. "Mannering!" he muttered.

"He is trying to pass us."

"Well, he ain't going to!"

He cracked the whip over Slick's black nose, and that willing animal put his heart and soul into his work. But still Mannering held on, taking full advantage of his extra dog power. The winding trail ran through a wood and mounted a steep hill. Thence it made a detour to avoid a precipitous drop. Jim looked down into the dizzy depths and suddenly pulled the sled into a clump of trees.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked.

"To let Mannering go by. There are some tracks that way. He is bound to follow them."

She was surprised at his apparent acceptance of defeat, but when Mannering had passed, beating his dogs unmercifully, Jim drove the sled to the brow of the precipice and began to unharness the dogs.

"You—you aren't going down that?" she quavered. "It's not possible!"

"Sure I am! It's about two miles around the other way."

Having got the dogs loose, he tightened all the sled lashings and pushed it until its nose hung into space.

"The dogs will follow," he said. "Take a firm hold."

She took a place behind him and gripped him around the waist. Jim set

the sled moving with a backward kick of his boot, and it took a headlong dive into the depths. Faster and faster grew the pace, the snow flying up from Jim's heels as he got all the steering way possible on to it. To Rosita it was a moment of awful terror. The wind on her face was like knives, and she could

see nothing but a confused mass of snow mingled with black patches of timber. That they could ever come through with their lives seemed to her utterly impossible.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out April 1st.

IN THE BOOK OF THE WILD

By S. Omar Barker

I AIN'T read sech a heap in books,
 Nor figgered up accounts,
 But I know how a b'ar track looks,
 And as fer catamounts
 And trails they make on ground or snow,
 Or scratches on a pine—
 That there's the learnin' that I know:
 A-readin' varmint sign.

Them soft, round padded tracks in rows
 Means "bobcat" plain and clear;
 And say, how sharp and purty goes
 The snow trails of the deer!
 The wolf he steps clean over logs;
 The coyote's trot is long;
 Though I cain't smell like bloodhoun' dogs,
 My old eyes don't go wrong.

And when there's snow fresh on the ground
 I like to take a look
 At wild folks' news spread all around,
 Like stories frum a book.
 Sometimes there's funny tales in sign,
 Like where some coyote pup
 Has tried to ketch a porkypine
 And got all prickled up!
 And other times they're sad and grim,
 Like cougars trailin' deer,
 Or tracks where helpless rabbits skim
 Across the snow in fear.

There's poems wrote in ever' track
 Fer them with eyes to see—
 Oh, learnin' got frum books I lack,
 But I've took my degree
 In knowin'—and in lovin', too!—
 Like Nature's fav'rite child.
 The stories wrote fer me and you
 In God's book of the wild.

TOP-NOTCH TALK

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers

MARCH 15, 1926.

No Age Limit

WE have talked with several people who had never read TOP-NOTCH because they were under the impression that it is a boys' magazine, intended for boys only. This, of course, was news to us, and we inquired further as to how they got this impression. The answer in each case was the same—it must be a boys' magazine because all the boys read it. Certainly they do! We get lots of letters from ten and twelve-year-old youngsters, some of whom acquired the TOP-NOTCH habit from their fathers, and these youngsters are the best friends and boosters that the magazine has. Youth is always so enthusiastic.

Youth, however, has no monopoly of this characteristic. Here is a letter from a friend at the other end of the line:

DEAR SIR: You ask your readers and friends to write to tell you whether they like your stories, but it took "Romeo's Chance," by Ralph Boston, in your January 15th issue, to make me overcome the lethargy to which a man of nearly eighty is disposed and to write to tell you that it was one of the best. I snickered aloud as I sat in my bachelor apartment and read about the dynamite in the buckboard. Perhaps I ought not to have laughed so heartily at such a dangerous situation, but it reminded me so forcibly of the time when I was postmaster at the site of the Medina Dam, fifty miles west of San Antonio, when that piece of engineering work was in process of construction, and a runaway hand car, loaded with dynamite, crashed into a freight car within ten feet of me.

The terror of it and the many laughable incidents, mingled together, gave me hysterics for weeks afterward. I wish I were a writer, and I would gamble that I could make a good story about this, not, however, as good as Mr. Boston's.

I am not too old to see a joke and, thank

God, I never shall be. I can laugh at and with young people, the only kind that I associate with, and I enjoy their pranks as much as though I were one of them. I am glad to say they enjoy being laughed at and with.

Yours truly,
WAKEMAN BROWN.
Kane Street, Houston, Texas.

We thank Mr. Brown for his interesting letter, and we print it here to show that there is no age limit to the readers of TOP-NOTCH. TOP-NOTCH is the magazine for every one, and the grown-ups find just as much entertainment in it as the juveniles do. This is an accomplishment of which we are justly proud. It is no mean feat to get out a magazine twice a month that wins the favor of boys and girls, of fathers and mothers, of soldiers and sailors, of business men and athletes, but we are doing it, and we shall continue to do it.

In the Next Issue

THE complete novel in the number that you will get on April 1st will be entitled "Plumes of Plunder," by William Wallace Cook. This is another story of that remarkable chap, "Seward of Sacatone," to whom Mr. Cook introduced you in his previous novel, "Where the Eagles Are Gathered," in the February 15th issue. Seward is more than remarkable; he is a lovable character; and in portraying Seward and his adventures Mr. Cook has evidently taken a real delight, for in both these stories he has done what is, in our opinion, the best work of his life. Won't you let us hear how you like Seward, for Mr. Cook has other tales to tell about him?

It isn't often that we can get a good long circus story, but John Miller Gregory, familiar to all TOP-NOTCH readers as the creator of that wonderful personage, "Speedy Swift, the world's greatest press agent," has come along

with a novelette that will, we are sure, add considerably to the popularity he has already won with our readers. He calls his story "The Runaway Circus," and you will find this a gripping tale from start to finish.

A number of our readers have been asking for stories of horse racing, so in the next issue one of the sport features will deal with the sport of kings. The story is called "Quite Without Precedent," and the author is M. J. Sullivan, a newcomer to TOP-NOTCH. There will be also a tale of intercollegiate running by Day Edgar, entitled "The Dark Moon," which we know you will enjoy.

Other short stories will be: "Between Winks," a detective tale by Morley Morton; "Hunters of the Moonlight," an animal yarn by Harold de Polo; "A Joke on the Joker," a mountaineer story by Charles Haven; and "The Hitter of the Pinch," a Central American baseball comedy, by Artemus Calloway.

There will be the next installments of the big serial novels, "The Order of the Octopus," by Sydney Horler, and "The Return of Colorado Jim," by George Goodchild. Mr. Horler's story deals with the workings of a gang of international crooks, while Mr. Goodchild takes "Colorado Jim" up into the Far North once more. Both these novels make fascinating reading.

The poets will be with us as usual, and their offerings will be: "Fairy Treasure," by Pat. B. Costello; "Ride 'Em, Cowboy!" by James E. Hungerford; "To the Golden Dawn," by Peter A. Lea; "Song of the West," by S. Omar Barker; and "Splitting the Breeze," by Calvert McQuay.

A Real Old-timer

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: "Romeo's Chance," by Ralph Boston, in your January 15th number, appeals to me as an ideal story, full of vim and action, humorous situations, near-tragedy—end-

ing with good will to all. This is the type I enjoy.

Being an old-timer—sixty-three years old—a rather extensive reader since a boy of nine—I remember well the *New York Weekly*, a Street & Smith publication, as it existed fifty years ago, and I have sipped from most of the standard magazines both past and present since then.

For the money, I am frank to say that you are getting out the best of them all—good American stories of the West, mystery, and sports.

Burt L. Standish, who, if I remember correctly, started TOP-NOTCH, has improved wonderfully in style and plot from his voluminous writings of years ago.

You have a splendid list of authors and poets, and your artist's sketches come in for praise, too.

Yours for future success,

JAMES A. MULVEY,

Emmett Street, Portsmouth, Va.



Praise From an English Girl

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR EDITOR: Just a line from a nineteen-year-old girl to let you know how much I enjoy TOP-NOTCH. I shall prove a constant reader as long as you continue the high character and quality of its stories.

Wishing you the best of success, I am yours,

Very sincerely,

(MISS) VERA BENNETT.

Lillington Street, South Belgravia, London,
S. W. 1.



A Boy's Opinion

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: In your September 15th issue every one seemed to be complimenting "By Hooks or Curves," by George F. Peabody. I must say that it is the best story I ever read in the baseball line, and incidentally the first story I ever read in a TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE. A friend of mine gave me this issue and has brought me most every issue since that one. I am only fourteen years old, but I sure like to read. My friend likes TOP-NOTCH best, and he should know, for he gets a good many magazines every month. I like Mr. Gardner's "Speed Dash" stories better than any others. "Crossed Signals," by Burt L. Standish, was a fine serial. Your air stories, also, are good.

Wishing you the best of success, I am,

Yours truly,

F. P. CURLEY.

Jefferson Street, Paducah, Ky.

To Our Readers

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR EDITOR: I never saw TOP-NOTCH until I got the May number. I think it is fine.

I see in this magazine where you print letters. I want to tell you I have been a shut-in for a number of years. I can get around the house sometimes, but I cannot sew. My husband and I are alone. I am alone all day. I get so lonesome. I live in a back-country place and can't get away from home. I'm too poor to buy magazines.

I would like some of your readers to send me some old magazines or storybooks—something for company. I would write and thank each one who was kind enough to send me a novel or magazine. I don't care how old—it would be new to me. Sincerely,

(MRS.) M. V. SHAW.

Gordonsville, Carleton County, N. B., Canada.



Good Reading Comes First

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: In a copy of TOP-NOTCH I noticed that you asked for the opinion of the readers as to the merit of certain stories, I can give you this recommendation for your magazine: If a person of average intelligence buys a copy of it for fifteen cents, he can for this little amount get as much entertainment and pleasure out of it, with all the comforts of home thrown into the bargain, as going three or four nights to a motion-picture show. The reason is, that in spite of the radio, the motion pictures, and the phonograph, in spite of all the other wonderful inventions of our age, good reading will always remain the cheapest and most profitable pastime.

Yours sincerely,

O. F. PAGE.

Chestnut Street, Fredonia, N. Y.



"Real Stuff"

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

SIR: Possibly a communication from England—at any rate of this character—is rather unusual, but I can assure you that it is unbiased admiration that prompts me to send it. I have just had an old issue of this brilliant journal passed on to me by a friend who recommended it as "good reading matter," and while assuring you that it is seldom my friend and myself hold the same views on anything, our criticism of your TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE does not vary in the slightest degree, and we both heartily agree that it is the "real stuff."

Contrary to the general idea in this coun-

try that American "copy" is "too far-fetched," I honestly say that it is a long time since I have come across such stories that compel the interest of the reader by their thrills and clean humor.

As a writer of Western fiction, Harrison Howard comes away from the ordinary stereotyped stories and takes up his subject on a much wider scale, and, what is everything in my humble judgment, in writing such matter is, that he thoroughly understands the subject to which he has devoted his efforts. Of course, much written on the subject is exaggerated and untrue, but occasionally we find a better form of literature which is written by authors who knew the West as it really was. Such a writer is Mr. Howard, to whom I offer my congratulations.

Please accept my congratulations to the editorial staff and other authors contributing to your journal, whom, by their writings, I should always like to regard as my American cousins.

Sincerely yours, R. S. JONES.

22 Arthur Street, Cadoxton-Bany, South Wales, England.



Wants Stories Without Love

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have been a reader of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE for over thirteen years and have missed only a few copies, and that was when I was in the big fuss "over there." I like most all the stories, especially the sport and adventure stories.

But I would enjoy these stories much more if there wasn't always a woman in them. I am a confirmed bachelor, and this "love element" often spoils a good story for me. I know, however, that most of your readers demand this kind of reading. I have several friends who will not read any kind of love story, and we sure would enjoy reading an occasional story in TOP-NOTCH without this element.

Taken all in all, TOP-NOTCH is a wonderful magazine. I wonder if you would please an old reader by publishing an occasional story about the marine corps? If I remember correctly I read one in TOP-NOTCH about twelve years ago, and I have been waiting ever since for another one.

Surely one of your authors knows this body of men well enough to give us some stories about them.

I have been an admirer of the marines for years and expect to be a lifelong reader of TOP-NOTCH. Very truly yours,

IRA J. FRIEND.

East Ninth Street, Cincinnati, Ohio.



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