MAY 26, 1928
VOL. XCI No. 4

WEEKLY MAY 26, 1928

The Popular

15¢
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THE CRIMSON RAMBLER
By
W. B. M. Ferguson

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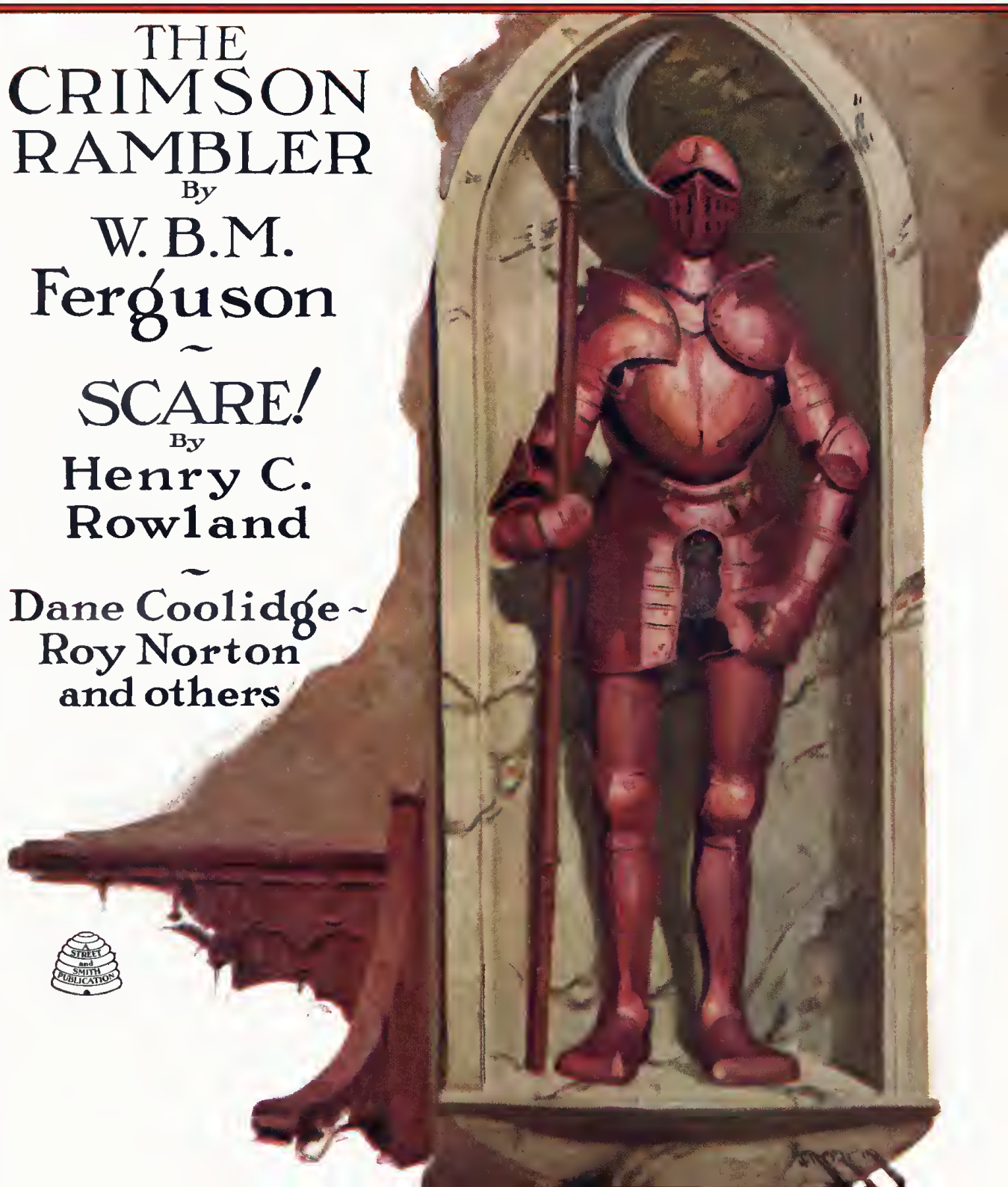
SCARE!
By
Henry C. Rowland

~

Dane Coolidge ~ Roy Norton and others



STREET and SMITH PUBLICATION

THE POPULAR

15 Cents

"Can he really play?" a girl whispered. "Heavens no!" Arthur exclaimed. "He never played a note in his life."

They Laughed When I Sat Down At the Piano But When I Started to Play!—

ARTHUR had just played "The Rosary." The room rang with applause. Then to the amazement of all my friends, I strode confidently over to the piano and sat down.

"Jack is up to his old tricks," somebody chuckled. The crowd laughed. They were all certain that I couldn't play a single note.

"Can he really play?" I heard a girl whisper to Arthur.

"Heavens, no!" Arthur exclaimed. "He never played a note in all his life. . . . ."

I decided to make the most of the situation. With mock dignity I drew out a silk handkerchief and lightly dusted off the piano keys. Then I rose and gave the revolving piano stool a quarter of a turn. The crowd laughed merrily. Then I started to play.

Instantly a tense silence fell on the guests. I played the first few bars of Liszt's immortal Liebesträume. I heard gasps of amazement. My friends sat breathless—spellbound! I played on.

A Complete Triumph!

As the last notes of Liebesträume died away, the room resounded with a sudden roar of applause. I found myself surrounded by excited faces. Everybody was exclaiming with delight—plying me with rapid questions . . . "Jack! Why didn't you tell us you could play like that?" . . . "Where *did* you learn?"—"Who *was* your teacher?"

"I have never even *seen* my teacher," I replied. "And just a short while ago I couldn't play a note."

"Quit your kidding," laughed Arthur, himself an accomplished pianist. "You've been studying for years. I can tell."

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"I have been studying only a short while," I insisted. "I kept it a secret so that I could surprise you folks."

No Teacher Needed

Then I told them the whole story.

"It seems just a short while ago that I saw an ad of the U. S. School of Music mentioning a new method of learning to play which only costs a few cents a day. The ad told how a woman had mastered the piano in her spare time at home—and *without a teacher!* The method she used required no laborious scales or exercises. It sounded so convincing that I filled out the coupon requesting the Free Demonstration Lesson.

"It arrived promptly and I started in that very night to study it. I was amazed to see how easy it was to play this new way. I sent for the course and found it was just as easy as A. B. C.! Before I knew it I was playing all the pieces I liked best. I could play ballads or classical numbers or jazz, with equal ease! And I never did have any special talent for music!"

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Next week we go North again, in the opening novel, "Wild Poison," by Clay Perry. This is the story of a remarkable paradox, for in it a constable goes after and arrests a person, and then resigns his job in order to assist in that person's defense! But wait—the prisoner is a lovely girl. That explains a lot. It's a fine tale, one of Clay Perry's best.

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CONTENTS FOR MAY 26, 1928

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A COMPLETE NOVEL

Here's a case where the evidence given a man by his was true. See how these things were reconciled—in

CHAPTER I.

A REMARKABLE PHOTOGRAPH.

ANSON JOHNS examined with satisfaction the negative that he had just developed. Despite the fact that the night had been misty with a fine drizzle of rain, the picture promised to be good. The heavy foliage of the woods, second growth with scattered pines and spruces, had evidently sheltered sufficiently his photographic apparatus. At any rate, Anson could see at a glance that his primary object had been successfully achieved. The skunk appeared to be excellent.

Although heir to a considerable fortune that had been made over to him on his majority, Anson had never been one of those rich idlers who may be anything from mere rust to a monkey wrench in the cogs of society. He had, since graduating from Yale, worked harder in his chosen field than do many job holders in their compulsory occupations. His contributions with pen, pencil, brush and camera had gone far to popularize the science of zoölogy.

He was one of those really useful though frequently derided liaison officers between the human and lower animal worlds. His profusely illustrated articles and books had done their share to promote the entente cordiale, establish a better understanding particularly in the male juvenile mind in its attitude toward birds and animals. Anson had done his share of that sort of missionary work that corrects the old-fashioned idea that it is manly to kill harmless creatures.

Anson was less a strictly scientific naturalist than a sort of biographer of those forms of life that are not human.

By

Henry C. Rowland

Author of "Circumstantial Evidence," Etc.

senses conflicted sharply with what his reason told him the working out of a human drama on the Maine coast,

He had been successful; and, though suffering occasionally at the hands of more orthodox confrères, and sometimes called a nature faker, his books and articles and illustrations, both sketched and photographed, had not only entertained many people but done a tremendous amount of good. Few young men of thirty, under no necessity to work at all, had worked so hard, achieved so much, and got so little credit for it—especially from friends and family.

Anson again examined the negative of the skunk which the night before had photographed itself. The position was perfect. The skunk for some reason was not interested in the bait but was crouched on the ground in a curiously spread out and flattened posture, as if startled. It looked to Anson as if his flash had hung fire a little, so that there had been that fraction of a second for the skunk to register fright. This surmise was, however, contradicted by the fact that the animal's attention was directed upward, as if by something in a tree.

Looking more carefully at the negative, Anson was next surprised to discover that this skunk could not possibly have photographed itself. The background was not such as he remembered, the ledge of rock under which was the skunk's burrow. Some other animal had served inadvertently as photographer. Evidently it had escaped being itself photographed by disturbing the camera in some way, changing its axis before pulling the trigger cord and setting off the flash.

Here was an interesting discovery, a curious coincidence. There had probably been a pair of skunks, Anson

thought, and one of them had got curious about the camera, made a flank advance upon it, and shifted its position in such an angle that it happened to be pointed toward the other skunk when the meddler had got foul of the trigger cord.

Anson had not noticed this change of position when he had retrieved his camera at dawn. Usually observant, his mind had been just then less on his work than on the log cabin barely visible about a furlong away, on a little plateau flanked by spruces and some few hardwood trees, with its flagged terrace dominating a lovely bay on the coast of Maine.

Anson's mind had not, in fact, been on his photography at all. The propinquity of this log cabin de luxe had disturbed him a good deal, since he had dined there the night before with its chatelaine, or perhaps chalet-aine would be more exact.

The disturbing feature lay first in the fact that a woman so young and lovely and married only three years should be living there alone, served well enough by a local married pair and her maid and a chauffeur boatman. Anson found it impossible to understand how any man with a wife like Nona Williams could absent himself for a day and night, let alone for a month, whatever the stress of his business affairs. There were no symptoms of disaccord between the two of which Anson was aware, nor could he discover any reason why Jack Williams should not have taken his lovely wife with him on his business errand to New York.

Although an intimate friend of them both, classmate and, in freshman year, roommate with Jack, and at one time a suitor to Nona, Anson had not seen either of them since their marriage until this day. In fact, he had not remembered their having bought and located for the summer in this charming part of the coast until he had happened to catch sight of the name "Padlock Cove" on his chart, when he remembered that this had been the heading on a note received from Jack the previous summer.

Anson had run into the cove the middle of the afternoon, landed at the Williams float, and climbed up the winding, stone-flagged path without meeting anybody. He found Nona alone in the "cabin," and she had greeted him cordially but with an air that had struck him as slightly detached. Jack, she told him, had been away for the past fortnight. Her maid, unable to support the isolation, had left the day before. There was a nice summer colony about two miles around the point, but Nona took no interest in its activities.

Later in the afternoon, while they were talking over old times and mutual friends, a strong pervasive odor as unpleasant as it was distinctive drifted through the open windows. Nona wrinkled her pretty nose in disgust.

"There's that beastly skunk again. They've got a den in the rocks over on the edge of the woods. It's got now so that they try to come into the house. You're a naturalist and woodsman, Anson. Can't you kill them or trap them for me?"

"It's a fixed principle of mine not to kill or maim any living creature," Anson said. "But before I leave I'll try to catch them unhurt in a box or barrel trap and deport them to some distant and wilder point."

Nona laughed. "Always true to form, aren't you, old dear? Well, anything to get rid of them. Jack was going to stalk them but was called away before he had time."

"I'd like first to get their portraits," Anson said. "My collection lacks a good skunk photograph. I'll look the ground over a little later."

Their talk then drifted to what Anson's friends chose to regard indulgently as his idler's fad, and as such not to be taken seriously, though his public

saw it differently. He described the object of this cruise down the Maine coast in his trim little auxiliary schooner.

Anson was one of those born nature lovers who must always be in the field—north in summer, south in winter, as migratory as a robin. The trammels of dwelling houses irked him, and even in so charmingly furnished and tenanted a one as this luxurious log cabin, he found it difficult to remain long in a chair. Pipe in mouth, he stood in front of the big stone fireplace, a striking and distinguished picture of his comparatively new class of American, the leisured but wholesomely active and energetic sort.

"I've got some bully motion pictures of gulls and seals, and the other day I managed to get a deer swimming across Long Pond, up back of here." He turned to reach for a match on the chimney and his eyes fell on the photograph of a girl.

"Who's that, Nona? Looks like yourself."

"My cousin, Iris Lloyd. She's a lot prettier."

"A matter for expert beauty judges. There's more of her. What a lovely face. So harmonious and serene."

"That's a mask she likes to wear. She's coming to-morrow for a visit."

"Likes nature?"

"Likes everything but not everybody."

"Wise girl. Scarcely fair though, because I should say that everybody likes her. Men especially."

Nona nodded. "She's a lure to men. Sort of a queen bee. They swarm round her. That's one reason she's coming here."

"Jack," said Anson, "had better rush his business and return."

He took the picture down and examined it more carefully, wondering how a face could be so serene, so limpid, and yet hold even in a portrait so provocative an allure. It was squarely oval and revealed the cool upward curve of the nose and a sort of boyish, resolute chin. A big girl, generously made; yet not of the athletic sort, but almost matronly. A predestined wife and mother: strong, capable, efficient and, above all, serene.

Anson, studying it, found himself suddenly in the grip of one of those curious attractions less the result of beauty than a sort of poignant sense of endearing familiarity, as if already there were some tie existing between himself and the original of this photograph.

It was for him an impression distinctly unique. He had not escaped romantic episodes; but all had been transient. And here, now, in this portrait, was a sense of permanency—as if a voice said, 'Once we meet, it will be something more than *'Bon jour, merci, et au revoir.*"

The face seemed in some eerie fashion to project toward himself precisely what he projected toward it: that curious sense of an acquaintanceship that was more than casual.

"When is she due to arrive?" he asked.

"I don't know. She was due this evening, but telephoned that her car had burned a bearing."

"How long is she going to stay?"

Nona said, with a sort of deliberation: "Until Jack comes back."

Anson pursed his lips. "That sounds —suggestive."

"He was in love with her before he met me. She considered him a while, then turned him down."

"Why?"

"Well—you roomed with him a year at college, so you ought to be able to guess."

Anson nodded. "Can do. Let's call it 'irrational impulsiveness.' "

"Yes, let's." Her voice was dry.

"The sort of man," said Anson, "who might be madly in love with his wife,

yet leave her for a fortnight's business trip."

"If it's that——" Nona said.

Anson reflected a moment, then said: "This grows more focal. Jack is constitutionally fickle but he is not false at heart. I'll tell you what he's like."

"I know," Nona said. "But what?"

"I once had a hound of pure Birdsong breed—a beauty. That hound had a serious defect. It would start to run, let's say, a deer. Then, in full cry, if anything else—a rabbit or a fox squirrel—crossed the trail directly ahead of him, this hound was irresistibly urged to abandon the deer trail and run this animal. But not for very long."

"Until some other—a coon, even a skunk——"

"Well, perhaps," Anson admitted; "but that scurry also would be brief. An imperative impulse. Invariably the hound returned to its first trail. No matter what that might be."

Nona nodded. "I see. A sort of cross-tag enthusiast. Well, I don't think I'd have wasted time on that hound, Anson, if I'd been you."

"I didn't. By patience and perseverance I cured the habit. But I think that in time as the dog grew older it would have cured itself. It was a young hound."

"That," said Nona, "precisely describes my husband."

All of this had been early in the afternoon. Later, Anson had located the skunk's den, when he had gone back aboard, secured his paraphernalia, and set it up. He had dined with Nona and returned aboard soon after dinner.

She would be pleased, he now reflected, to see how the picture had turned out; also interested when he explained what must have happened—how some other animal photographer had taken the picture.

He dried the negative, then made a print. The skunk was good but the background less distinct—slightly perplexing, in fact, with the trees and ledges a bit blurred, as might be expected of so thick a night. But it did not matter. As the portrait of a skunk, the result was excellent.

Spreading the print on his desk, Anson examined it in greater detail than he had done the negative. A sort of excrescence in the crotch of the tree at which the skunk was looking, attracted Anson's attention. It took shape as might some object disguised in the puzzle picture of a child's magazine. Anson picked up his hand lens and examined more carefully this malformation. As he did so he was conscious of a sudden lifting of the diaphragm, a contraction of the heart; and at the nape of his neck came that spinal reflex that may cause a tingling of the hair follicles.

For the excrescence was of no arboreal sort. It was the torso of a man hanging supine in the crotch, arms dangling, scarcely distinguishable against the background of saplings, face against the bark. And this bark, Anson now observed, showed in the center of the trunk a dark and glistening smear. He reflected that the drizzle had not begun until after midnight, when the breeze had sprung up southeast and the Seguin Island diaphone had announced the fog coming in.

Anson stared at the print with a numb horror that left him for the moment incapable of clear thought. Why a dead man hanging in the crotch of a young oak? It was at this dangling body that the skunk was looking. And if the body had been there when Anson had set his camera, how could he have possibly missed seeing it?

Staring stupidly at the print, there took shape almost in the center of the background of the print what appeared to be a large white lichen growing high on the trunk of a dead tree. But it was manifest to the naturalist that a lichen would in that relative position to the camera be presented on edge, so

that unless broken down, it could scarcely show the white glare on the surface of this fungus.

His hand shook a little as now he focused the lens on this detail. There seemed to be another smaller fungoid growth halfway between the large one and the ground; and it needed but an instant's examination to reveal the smaller excrescence as a human hand. The fingers were slightly spread, but it was unmistakably a hand.

Anson brought the lens to bear on the larger growth. He discovered it to be a face pallid in the glare of the flashlight, slightly obscured by a network of twigs that blurred the features a little. Yet it did not blur them so that they were indistinguishable.

The face was that of a woman—a young and beautiful woman. It was, in fact, so far as he was able to determine, the face of Nona Williams.

CHAPTER II.

A VERY STRANGE POLICEMAN.

WITH eyes glued on his hand lens, Anson stared at his prodigy with the stark horror of a crystal gazer to whose rapt vision is presented some glimpse of a nether world.

For not only was the scene recorded dreadful, the limp body that of a dead man—a murdered man, since one scarcely dies of natural causes in the fork of a tree, and the young woman's face like a pallid mask peering from behind a tree; but there was in the whole setting—the arrangement of rocks and trees and ferns, as depicted in the glare of the magnesium—an eerie awfulness, like a horrid witch's kitchen, a scene of crime.

Nona's face was perhaps the worst; for it was of a glare so white that at first it had failed to register itself on Anson's retinæ as a face at all, but appeared to be a lichen.

He now perceived that there could be no error. The wide, oval, well-spaced eyes, the profuse bobbed hair with its natural wave, were unmistakable—as was also the supine body hanging in the forked oak.

Anson took a deep breath, pulled himself together, laid down his lens, and leaned back in his chair to think. This mental process was difficult—failed at the very start to gain any ground, to rationalize any of the statements recorded by the photograph. Here, combined in the same pose, were a skunk sniffing at the blood running down from the crotch of a tree in which hung a dead man, while Nona Williams peered, terrified, from behind a big white pine.

Anson tried to consider the details in order. The dead man he thought to be Jack Williams, because of the shock of black, wavy hair worn rather long, and a coat that looked like homespun of a light tint. But why should he have climbed the tree? Why should Nona have gone to that spot, where she knew that Anson had set his camera? And whatever might be the reason for this, why—after the flash and suspecting that she might be photographed—why should she have left this record undisturbed? And who or what had set off the flash?

The presence of the skunk told this much: that the body of the man in the fork must have been there a good while prior to the taking of the picture, and that Nona must for some reason have stolen quietly to the spot just at the time of the exposure, or else must have been waiting behind the tree for a long time and then peered out just as the flash went off. Probably the noise made by the skunk or skunks had attracted her attention. But why should she have been waiting there?

Anson placed the print in his little cabin safe and went on deck. It was by this time nearly noon. Nona had asked him to lunch with her and pos-

sibly her cousin Iris Lloyd, who might by that time have arrived. But Anson wished to scout the location of the picture immediately. His field work as a naturalist had trained him in woodcraft and cultivated his power of close observation and detection of tracks or other disturbance of the ground. He got aboard his dinghy and rowed himself ashore. When he had gone at daybreak to retrieve his camera he had merely picked up the instrument, observing with satisfaction that an exposure had been made.

Landing now at the float, he did not mount by the path that led to the cabin, but followed the shore around to a point directly beneath that part of the woods where the skunk den was located. This spot, on the same level as the cabin, was a wooded plateau that sloped down steeply about a hundred feet to the shore.

Anson climbed up by what would be the normal course of ascent or descent, his eyes alert for "sign," as a hunter would say. He was, in fact, that most keen of hunters—the camera hunter. But he was unable to discover any evidence of a body dragged along. More than that; though mounting in a zigzag, he did not discover so much as a scuffling of the leaves as a trace of anybody having passed that way.

Arriving, presently, at the ledge of rock where the skunk burrow was located, Anson circled it, minutely examining the ground. He failed to find any tracks at all, except those made by himself when he had gone there to set the camera. The forked tree in which the body had appeared was immediately in evidence, at right angles to the direction in which the camera had been sighted. And this fact offered a fresh perplexity: Anson could not be sure that when he had got the camera early that morning its direction had not been as he had placed it.

He examined the oak. Its trunk was about ten inches in diameter, the fork some five feet above the ground. The bark was wet and glistening from the drizzle; but Anson could discover no trace of blood. He wiped it with his handkerchief, then examined the fabric. It was merely wet; showed no stain. More baffling still, the damp mulch of oak leaves at the foot of the tree lay smooth and even, undisturbed by the scuffling not to be avoided by anybody who might have dragged the body from the crotch and removed it.

Anson felt as if there were something wrong about his special senses; that they were not functioning accurately. There was the evidence of the camera: that sort of circumstantial evidence that is absolute, indisputable—not subject to auto-deception, like the human kind of evidence that is so often wrongly given precedence. A man, he reflected, might swear in court that he saw a cat at the foot of that tree. But if the camera revealed the animal to be a skunk, then a skunk it was bound to be. The eye of the camera is not subject to mental influence.

Anson then made a discovery of some value. He climbed up into the fork; then, stepping on a limb just above it, perceived that from this position the whole of the log cabin came clearly in view. From the ground one caught only an obscured glimpse of its eastern end. A person wishing to spy on the premises with no risk of discovery could do so by cutting across from the road, entering this fringe of woods, and climbing up into this tree.

But why in the name of common sense should Jack Williams or any other person have wished to do this thing, and at night. And how could he have managed it in the darkness? It was manifestly impossible that the body could have been there late in the afternoon, a little before dusk, when Anson had gone there to set the camera. He could not possibly have helped seeing it.

Anson had never felt so utterly at a loss. Nothing about this affair checked up with itself at all. Here were presented simultaneously incontrovertible facts that denied the existence of each other. The skunk, the body, Nona's face and hand—and a terrain absolutely undisturbed. No human agency could function at the foot of that tree without disturbing the flat layers of wet oak leaves, and having disturbed them, no agency could replace them in their even, unruffled condition. That was manifestly as impossible as it would be to pluck the petals off a rosebud, then put them back precisely as they had been. Hours of heavy downpour might have done it; but there had been no actual rain at all, merely a Scotch mist, a fine drizzle.

Anson next located the pine tree behind which the camera had registered Nona peering out. This was a little beyond the forked oak, slightly to the left of its axis from the camera. Here the same perplexity was presented; though less markedly, because the carpet of pine needles was more smooth and dense and better able to support light footsteps without sign of disturbance.

There are moments when the absolute contradiction of the evidence of special senses gives one a sense of baffled mental action that is almost terrifying. This happens at odd moments to us all. A man alone in his study sitting at his desk may lay down a letter, his eye glasses, turn his attention for a few moments to something else, and then, on needing the article just deposited, find it vanished into thin air. His reason, the evidence of special senses, tells him that he placed that article in that spot and that he has not moved his own position since.

These evidences do not check, and for the moment he is tormented by a sense of mental inaccuracy. He could swear he has not moved, would take oath to that effect in court, carries in his own mind full conviction that he has not shifted his position.

And yet he has. He has performed some slight customary act so habitual as to be utterly unrecorded by his memory of motor function and elapsed time. He has stepped across the room to throw a cigarette in the fireplace, or got up to raise the window, and the spectacles he had thought to lay on the desk were in his hand as he did this and were laid down elsewhere, possibly on the mantelpiece or window sill. He discovers his error presently, smiles at his mental lapse, and thinks no more about it. But while the indecision lasts, he is utterly at loss. On such slight lapses men's lives have hung, and have even been sacrificed.

So now did Anson find himself in a state of mental disorder that for one of his clear faculties and nervous structure was almost agonizing. He could not discredit the evidence of the camera nor that of his clear vision on examining the print. Neither could he now discredit the evidence of his eyes at the calm, inscrutable denial offered here at the scene.

For the moment he was forced to give it up. There was absolutely nothing to do about it, no place to start, no *point d'appui*. He would have to talk to Nona, locate Jack Williams. And he would have to show her the photograph and ask her what the answer to the puzzle picture might be.

He made his way toward the log cabin. It was a modern structure, very solid and ornate, of peeled spruces beautifully fitted, two-storied, and in shape a square U. In front, there was a terrace of big flagstones neatly fitted. With all its pretense of pioneer simplicity, this log cabin had plainly cost a great deal of money. There were big single panes of heavy crown glass through which one commanded on one side a splendid view of bay, and on the other side an outlook of equal splendor—a lagoon with

distant wooded hills and some slopes of pasture and scattered farms.

Jack Williams was rich, with an inherited fortune and his present high-salaried position as an officer of a big fruit-importing company. He was thirty-five, and had been a naval-reserve officer aboard a destroyer on the North Sea blockade. He was handsome, efficient, popular and a good deal of a law unto himself. He was nearly a superman in some respects.

His many friends conceded that his trouble lay in being overfond of women. He was one of those men who, for all good intentions, seem unable to resist the feminine lure to which they are constantly exposed in the nature of their personality. If, indeed, the body registered by the camera had been that of Jack, despite the contradictory evidence that there had never been anybody in that tree at all, then there would be a woman at the bottom of it, Anson thought.

He had, of course, considered the possibility of some trick of the camera like a double exposure, and discarded it. There was but one decomposition process on that negative. Anson's knowledge of photography assured him that it was exact.

As he approached the cabin the heavy front door opened and a young woman in a long white coat came out. Anson thought for a moment, at his distance of about two hundred yards, that it was Nona; but perceived almost instantly from the taller stature that it was not. She must therefore be Iris Lloyd. Sighting Anson, she came forward to the edge of the flagged terrace and stood waiting his approach.

The sun, breaking through the mist, streamed down on a face that grew more beautiful as Anson advanced. Anson had never seen a woman's face that so filled his eyes, satisfied all vague requirements of his mental vision. It was contradictory: serene yet tremendously vital, peaceful and still provocative by virtue of some quality in the nose and mouth. Her eyes, a sort of soft fog-gray, were level, cool yet intense. She suggested Greek sculpture modified by allegoric French statues, and with French warmth, so that the classic was infused with ardor.

Here, Anson perceived immediately, was the ultimate of feminine desirability in a young woman entirely aware of her allure and with the force of character to throw around it a sort of vitrine—a protective envelope that was entirely transparent. She would be, Anson felt subconsciously, as aloof as something materialized from another plane, until she chose to meet an admirer on a neutral ground.

Her greeting of him was informal enough. "Hello, Mr. Anson Johns," she said smilingly. "I've been hearing about you since I was a kid; and now, at last, we meet."

"Greeting, Iris Lloyd." Anson took the hand she offered. "If I had known what you were like, my interest in natural history would have been more specialized."

"To what species?"

"The more interesting half of the human one."

"That would have been a pity. A great many children would have missed your nature books and their fascinating illustrations."

"Thanks, for taking me more seriously than most of my friends."

"I take your efforts seriously. Did you manage to photograph your skunk?"

"Why, yes. It came out rather well. When did you arrive?"

"Last night. Not long after you'd left. They had the part I needed for my car, and rushed the job through. Jack's ever-ready pocketbook may have oiled the works a little."

Anson was taken aback. "Jack's!"

"Why, yes. He decided to come with

me, get his leave of absence from Nona extended, then pack a few things and tear off again."

"Has he gone?"

"Yes—shoved off at daybreak in his swiftly."

"Car?"

"No, the speed craft. He's bound for Boston, then Haiti."

"Why Haiti?"

"One of their ships is ashore. Salvage job. Jack's a sailor more than anything else, and he wants to get there as soon as possible, to oversee the job. He's going to fly to Key West, then some point on the coast of Haiti."

Anson received this news in silence.

"You look cut up about it," Iris said.

"Where's Nona?"

"Still in bed. I'm a little worried about Nona. When I looked in she was asleep but moving restlessly about and muttering. You're an old friend of the family, Anson." She gave him a clear, level look under brows that drew a straight line across her wide forehead. "What's wrong here?"

"Oh, the same old thing," Anson said wearily. "To quote from Kipling: 'Too much ego in the cosmos.'"

"It's too soon for it," Iris said.

"It's always too soon for it—when it's not too late. Why the devil do people marry for love and disagree?"

Her splendid shoulders rose a little. "On that account, perhaps—no governor to the machine. Iron filings fuse if heated in an atmosphere of oxygen. Jack was always a both-feet-in-the-trough animal." There was a sudden strange blaze in the gray eyes, like a midsummer sun burning through a thin patch in the fog. She said then more deliberately: "I love Nona as much as I hate that handsome mistake she's married to."

"Well," said Anson slowly, "I'm glad of that. Because she's apt to need a friend."

Iris looked at him keenly. "She's got two, I should say. Anything happened. You look upset."

"I feel that way. You come along with me."

"Where to?"

"Out aboard my boat."

"Can't we talk about it here?"

"No. I want to show you something. I need help. For the first time in my life I'm not at all sure about the sane, honest evidence of my special senses, which until this morning never double-crossed me."

"In what way?"

"Come with me and I'll show you. Then we'll talk. But first let's go over to where I photographed that skunk."

Iris hesitated. "I think I'd better tell you something. There's a strange man skulking round the place."

"What sort? Where did you see him?"

"I caught sight of him out of the window when I was taking my bath. A sort of cast-iron-looking man. Felt hat, gray suit, shoulders like a prize fighter and face like a sledge hammer. He was giving the house the once-over, then went down to the landing. I've been waiting to see him and ask him what he wants."

"How did he get here?"

"There's a car on the side of the trail where it enters the woods. I've got a sort of hunch he followed Jack and me."

"Have you any notion why?"

"Not the slightest. The brute moves like a wolf. He's the movie sleuth at its highest art. Sort of modern Javert. I can't help wondering a little if Jack's gone and got himself wound up in something messy."

Anson considered this fresh complication. It seemed to him that things were going from bad to worse. But he merely said:

"Well, let's start our own scout; and if this fellow shows up, we'll ask him what he wants."

She nodded. Anson led the way to the skunk's den where, without describing more than his object of photography, he asked Iris to examine for herself the ground at the foot of the forked oak, to note its lack of any disturbance. Then, though there was even less to see, he led her to the pine tree.

"Fix both these trees in your mind," he said. "My camera was there, directly in front of the burrow and pointing almost at it. I can't find any trace of anybody's having been here at all."

Iris' light-gray eyes were questing about on all sides in the neighborhood of the pine tree. She now said quietly:

"*I* can."

"What?"

Iris moved with the lightness of step that Anson had already noted to the edge of the circle sheltered by the forked oak, and stooped to pick up some object hidden by a cluster of bayberry. "This," she said, and handed to Anson an automatic pistol of .32 caliber.

He took it with the embarrassment of an expert who has slipped up on his specialty. A brief inspection showed him that it was loaded and had not been fired. As he slipped it into the side pocket of his coat, something stirred behind the ledge of rock beneath which was the skunks' burrow.

"What's that?" Iris whispered.

A man stepped out in sight, about twenty paces from where they were standing. Anson's first startled glance identified the prowler, from Iris' apt commentary on his appearance. "A sort of cast-iron man," she had said. And the intruder verified the simile. He looked, Anson thought, as if cast of such metal in a mold, then become articulated and animated. There was a metallic quality about his square forehead and face and shoulders—even his clothes.

But here, Anson immediately perceived, the ferruginous suggestion stopped. There was a flaw to the iron-rusty eyes, with their darker flecks. Cast iron has a strong, friendly quality, not shared by other metals. It does not, like gold, arouse avarice often murderous. Nor is it bloodthirsty like steel. It has not the falsity of brass nor the softness of copper and lead.

The uses it serves are sound and trustworthy, so long as one bears in mind that it is cast, not wrought, and therefore limited in cohesive force, its molecular arrangement not fitted to withstand shock concussion nor permitting it to bend. Intelligently employed, its service is kindly and dependable, from the kitchen range to the four-ton anchor of a ship, so that if the crucible from which the iron is run be well tended there is no fear of flaws.

This quality was precisely what the man advancing on them failed to possess. His face was not only hard but cruel, and any form of cruelty cannot possibly be other than evil. Cruelty and efficiency may mix, but cruelty and good cannot combine in humans. Moreover, his very first glance told Anson that if the man was a policeman of sorts, a detective, then he had been recruited from the underworld. Just as a U. S. bank-note expert in his skilled passing on used bills detects instantly a counterfeit bank note without being able to state what is wrong about it, so now did Anson sense the dishonesty in this man, as if there was a sort of blurred, indistinguishable brand of malefactor stamped on him.

If Anson had not been instantly aware that whatever his official position and present line of conduct, the man belonged actually to a criminal class, he would have been more amenable to the demand now made upon him. But there is always between an honest man and a dishonest one an instinctive antagonism that, in the case of positive natures, ignores diplomacy.

Two or three paces in front of Anson the man paused. "I'll trouble you

for that gun, mister." He made a slight gesture of holding out his hand.

Anson drew the pistol from his pocket and looked down at it thoughtfully, then glanced at the man opposite.

"What's your authority?" he asked.

"Police."

"Of what State?"

The square but sinister face darkened. There was a conformation in the scowl that is always significant, where the grooves over the eye do not draw themselves straightly but come down in a twist that reveals the eyes as being not precisely on the same level. Also the lids of one are apt to narrow more than the other.

"U. S. Federal Service," he growled.

"Show me," Anson answered.

Iris was standing a few paces clear of Anson. She had slipped on a long, white, fleecy polo gown of Jack's, for there was still a fine mist falling. Had she been provided with a golden sickle and cluster of mistletoe she might have posed for a druid priestess, and the gleam in her gray eyes was sacrificial as they rested on this soi-disant policeman.

With a gesture of impatience he threw back the breast of his coat. Anson looked at the star displayed and shook his head.

"That doesn't prove your claim. It's no more Federal Service than it is Scotland Yard. You'll have to show me something better."

The effect of this statement was explosive, or at least threatened to be such. With a quickness that the eye could scarcely follow, the man snatched from under his left arm a weapon similar to that in Anson's hand and leveled it.

"Drop that gun—quick!" he snarled.

Snarled is scarcely the word. The order cracked out like the sharp report that one felt certain must follow immediately in case of disobedience. But it did not follow. Anson said slowly, in his cultured voice:

"Please observe that the muzzle of my gun is on the pit of your stomach. You might as well shoot into yourself."

From the foot of the pine tree there came a curious sound, like a sigh. It was very far from being the sort of aspiration strictly in order, so far as one could see.

There was a moment of silence. In this brief stalemate the burden of strain was not manifest on Anson. The crinkled face of the man opposite seemed to freeze. Then suddenly it relaxed, became normal, human, and not unpleasing. He shoved his weapon back into its holster, slung under his left arm. The corners of his mouth were drawn down in a smile that, while it had the reverse English, was still obviously a smile.

"Once in a blue moon," he said, as if to himself.

"What?" Iris asked.

"The man that stays with you, lady."

"It strikes me you were the one that took the chance," Anson said. "Otherwise, we were fifty-fifty. Don't come any closer, though. I'm better with a gun than at strong-arm stuff. Do you mind telling us what you want here in the woods?"

"What if we pool our stuff, mister? I'm on special detail to protect Mr. Williams. Now what's your game here?"

"I," said Anson, "am what my friends call a nature nut. Wild-animal photography is my line. Last night I sat up my camera here to take a picture of a skunk that lives in the hole under this ledge. Somebody saw fit to mess up the picture."

"How mess it up?" asked the man.

"It's your play. Why does Mr. Williams need police protection?"

"Somebody was out to get him. I was right behind this lady's car all the way. My name is Slade. Your move now, sir."

"I got the skunk," Anson said, "and after I'd made a print I found I'd got something more, besides. Have you

any reason to believe that Mr. Williams has been killed?"

"What's that?" Iris cried.

The man gave her a searching look.

"The chauffeur swears he took him to Rockland in the speed craft as soon as it got light this morning," he said. "That doesn't check with what I think."

"If you were watching the premises, how could he have left in a speed boat without your knowing it?" Anson asked.

"Your flash light here drew me off. That was just before dawn. There was somebody going through the woods and I followed. I was down by the shore when the boat put off. Your turn, mister."

"Anson Johns," Anson introduced himself. "Well, my picture showed the body of a man hanging in the fork of this oak sucker."

A blaze of eagerness lighted Slade's face. "Can I see that?"

"Perhaps—a little later, Mr. Slade. I'll have to know more about you. It seems to me the first fact to be established is whether or not the chauffeur did really take Mr. Williams to Rockland. That oughtn't to be so hard."

"It wasn't," said Slade. "He didn't. I found out that much this morning."

"Who," Iris asked, "wanted to kill Jack Williams, and why?"

Slade looked at her with a frown. "I'll tell you that, lady, when Mr. Johns feels like giving me a litte more. One thing, Mr. Johns. Please put that gun in a safe place and don't handle it more than you can help."

"I get you. Sorry I have such a suspicious nature, Mr. Slade. But it's hard for me to believe that my friend Jack Williams needed a bodyguard to follow him here."

Slade burst out violently. "Well, then, what do you take me for? What else would I be doing here?"

"I can't imagine."

Slade took a step toward him. Anson slowly shook his head, and motioned him to keep his distance. Slade's face darkened.

"You know more about this than you want to tell. Don't you forget that pretty often there's a long stretch for the accessory after the fact."

"Look here," said Anson, "if this job's as bad as you think, it's no one-man business. Suppose you get a little official backing. There's a telephone at the house. A little later in the day we may be able to get together on this thing. Meantime, I've given you all I'm going to."

He motioned to Iris, and they walked toward the house. Nearly to the terrace, Anson looked back and saw Slade cutting across for the road or lane that led to the county road a mile distant.

"What do you make of that bird, Iris?" Anson asked.

"I thought at first he was some sort of a detective, but now I'm not so sure."

"Nor I. It looks to me as if he'd followed Jack here and bumped him off—or was one of a mob that bumped him off. But why should the chauffeur have said he took Jack to Rockland? And where does Nona come in?"

"I can't imagine," Iris murmured.

"What sort of man is this chauffeur?"

"He's a tough little old East Side gangster that Jack collared a few years ago at a second-story job in their Greenwich house. Nona begged him off and took him on as chauffeur. Danny would go through fire and brimstone for her."

"Then he is lying for her. How did he feel toward Jack?"

"I don't know. After all, Jack let him off, and then consented to Nona's giving him a job. But you can't tell. Gratitude works obliquely."

"Yes. It hangs more on personal sympathy than service rendered."

"I want to see the photograph," Iris said.

"First let's talk to Nona. She ought to tell us all she knows."

"Unless she wants to shield whoever it was that killed Jack," Iris said.

"Jack hasn't been killed," Anson said shortly.

Iris' lovely head turned and her fog-gray eyes examined Anson's face. There is more to be got from a profile than one might think, and the eyes need not be sounded for deeper meaning. A great deal is told by the lines of the face, especially about the mouth. Anson's finely balanced aquiline features now showed a fixed conviction as plainly as though he had vociferated this in open session and banged his fist on the table.

"Why so sure?" Iris asked.

"I'm no detective, but I know my woodcraft. My eyes are trained to examine ground for tracks, even of tiny animals, chipmunks, field mice, also claw scratches on trees. My photograph shows the body of a man hanging in the fork of that oak sucker. But there's some catch in it."

"Why?"

"Because nobody could have got a dead body out of that fork and removed from the premises with no disturbance of the ground that I could discover."

"What if he'd been alive?" Iris asked.

"Then he might have managed it, with great care and a good deal of gymnastics."

"How?"

"By going out hand over hand on the branch above the fork until it bent down so that his feet touched the ground. He could have landed on the wet leaves at the edge of the pine thatch, where it would need a better tracker than I am to pick up his trail."

"But why all that performance?" Iris asked.

"I can't imagine. There's no place to start. Why should he want to drape himself in the fork of a tree and stay in that painful position long enough for a skunk to come out of his hole and investigate? And what was Nona doing there, and where does Slade come in, and who took the picture? Nothing fits."

"But you feel sure Jack hasn't been killed?"

"Positive."

"Then perhaps Danny did take him to Rockland, after all."

"Perhaps," Anson agreed.

They had reached the terrace, and as they crossed it to the house Nona came out the door into the bright sunshine. Anson noticed that she was pale, with dark shadows under her eyes; but there was no sign of drooping in her pose. These two cousins shared a similar beauty, might have been sisters, almost twins, having been born in the same year.

The resemblance between first cousins can be more pronounced, where they both inherit from the same strain of family blood, than any likeness between sisters, where one inherits from the paternal and the other the maternal side. Each had the same perfectly beautiful face, but Nona's was more piquant and lacked that absolute repose that Iris seemed able to slip on like a mask. The disturbing quality of Iris throughout lay in a provocative allure, not only of features but of her slow, graceful gestures that were an unconscious posturing, like the purposefully seductive movements in a Circassian dance.

Anson said directly: "Nona, you should have taken charge of the camera after the flash."

She looked at him with a puzzled expression. "What are you talking about, Anson?"

"When I made a print and saw you looking out from behind the pine tree, it gave me the jolt of a lifetime. What was it all about?"

She looked bewildered.

"I don't know what you mean, Anson. Please elucidate."

"I wish I could. All I know is that I went there early this morning and found that a picture had been taken. I went aboard and developed and printed it, and found that I had not only the skunk sniffing at the tree but your face sticking out from behind a big pine in the background and your hand on the trunk."

"But that's impossible," Nona said. "I haven't left the house since we came back after you set the camera."

"Did you see Jack off this morning?"

"No."

"Have you seen a man that's been hanging round?"

"No. I haven't seen anybody." Nona's tone was short.

"Not even your chauffeur?"

"No." And she added impatiently: "Why the questionnaire?"

"Well, because I couldn't account for your being in the picture."

"I wasn't in the picture. It must be some freak of photography. Let's see it."

"It's in my safe aboard the boat."

"Well, let it wait there until after luncheon. It's just been announced."

She led the way to the dining room. Anson looked helplessly at Iris, who made a gesture that he had noticed before and which seemed to be a mannerism, the drawing of her shoulders slightly back and thrusting out of her bosom like a person about to practice deep breathing.

As they seated themselves, Nona said casually: "One of Jack's fruit ships has got aground off Haiti, and he's in a dreadful stew about it, especially as he's one of the underwriters. He's tearing off down there by airplane to see what can be done."

"What part of the coast?" Anson asked.

"I can't remember the name. He said it was a bad place and if there came a gale or hurricane she'd be a total wreck."

Anson said nothing. Iris also was silent, starting her luncheon with a healthy relish. Neither she nor Nona were perturbed in any way that Anson could see. He was himself more mystified than disturbed. Nona's statement had stirred again that uncomfortable doubt in the evidence of the camera and of his visual sense. But there were Slade and the automatic pistol.

They talked casually of unimportant things during the meal. Anson tried to be entertaining, but felt as if this effort was directed toward a pair of very lovely sphinxes. He was conscious of a deep preoccupation on the part of the two young women. Sitting opposite Iris, he discovered presently that she was watching him intently and surreptitiously. Every time he looked up from his plate he was aware that her gaze left his face the fraction of a second before his eyes focused on her own.

Luncheon finished, he excused himself. "I'll go out aboard and get that print," he said.

The weather had cleared but the air was raw, and the two young women drew chairs in front of the huge stone fireplace on which a big log was smoldering. Anson went down to the landing, where he had left his dinghy. He was about to cast off, when he heard a deep thrumming that sounded like an airplane. It came from behind a long promontory that ended in a high ledge jutting out like a natural breakwater to give the cove perfect shelter. As he waited, the sound diminished a little in volume, and a moment later a speed boat appeared around the end of this rampart and headed in for the float.

The craft slowed, ran up alongside, checked and edged in daintily. A small, oldish man with a square and somewhat battered face stepped out, made a perfunctory salute, then rigged out fenders and secured the beautifully finished water vehicle, which was more like an au-

tomobile in its appointments than a boat. This would be Danny, just returned from Rockland, Anson naturally opined.

"You made a quick trip," he said.

"She will do her forty in smooth water like to-day, sir."

"You must be a good pilot," Anson said. "It was pretty thick when you shoved off."

"Mr. Williams ran her over, sir. It is only a matter of thirty miles, but the boss played safe, not to pile her up on a rock."

Anson looked at him thoughtfully. Danny did not impress him as the New York ex-gangster and porch climber that Iris had described. He had rather the appearance of an athletic trainer, member of a prize-fighter's camp followers. His skin was fresh and ruddy, and though one ear was thick and the nose flattened and slued a little to starboard with a recent scar on the edge of one orbital cavity, there was something pleasing about the alert, pugnacious face—a sort of cheerful deviltry.

Danny's criminal activities would have been prompted as much by a wrong aspect of adventure as from any sordid motive, Anson thought. He could understand why Nona had interceded for him, also why Jack, good-natured and easy-going, should have let Danny off and consented to the porch climber's entering his service.

Anson took a quick resolution. "Danny," he said, "I'm Mr. Johns, an old friends of Mr. and Mrs. Williams'. I'm in a funny jam and need your help. It's for the sake of Mrs. Williams."

Danny gave him an alert, wary look. His eyes were widely spaced and goggled a little. His animal prototype, Anson thought, would be a bright and valiant cross between a spaniel and bulldog. The crisp, curly hair was grizzled over his temples.

"Shoot, sir," he said briefly.

"Get in the dinghy and come out aboard my boat with me."

Danny stooped, cleared the painter, stepped into the small cedar boat, and, shifting, the oars steadied the craft for Anson to take his place in the stern. The ex-gangster did this in a sailorly way. Anson liked his smartness in taking the rower's seat.

"Ex-navy?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. When I was a kid I done some yachting, too."

He shoved off and pulled out alongside Anson's ketch, *Grebe*. As they came alongside Anson was surprised to see none of his three men in sight. He was his own sailing master and employed two Swedish hands and a Japanese cook steward.

Hailing the boat, there was no answer. Anson called again. Evidently nobody was aboard. This was the more perplexing because the other boat of the two he carried had not been put overside.

In the grip of a sudden dread, Anson slipped down into his cabin—all of the after part abaft the engine, which was bulkheaded off from the little saloon. The safe, a small, modern one adapted to yachts, was under the cockpit behind a panel. Anson spun the combination, opened it, and drew out some papers. But the print was not there.

CHAPTER III.

SECOND-STORY-MAN DETECTIVE.

DANNY had followed Anson aboard, dropping the dinghy astern. As Anson came up through the hatch, Danny read the consternation in his face, but asked no questions.

"Danny," Anson said, "while we were at luncheon in the house, there's been a detective aboard. He appears to have got rid of my crew and opened my safe."

"They got their nerve, them dicks," Danny said cheerfully.

"I fell foul of him this morning on the edge of the woods, where I'd set up my camera to photograph a skunk. Do you know anything about a man named Slade?"

Danny shook his head. "I do not, sir."

"When I developed the photograph," Anson said, "I found I had not only the skunk but what looked like the body of a dead man hanging in the crotch of a small oak. A little beyond was a pine tree. Mrs. Williams was looking round the trunk of it. Do you know anything about all that?"

Danny's forehead crinkled. "No, sir, but it's the bunk. Something wrong with the picture, I mean."

"Well, that's only the half of it." Anson described his clash with the man Slade, then took the automatic pistol from his pocket. "Have you ever seen this gun?"

Danny nodded. "Mr. Williams' gat, sir. I ought to know it," he grinned. "I looked into the muzzle one night. That there scratch on the barrel identifies it."

"Well," said Anson. "This brute Slade's got the print."

"What about the film, sir?" Danny asked.

"There. You said something. My brain's turned mushy. I'll bet he didn't get that."

Anson had placed the negative with a collection of other nature studies in a little secret locker to which one had access by taking out a locker drawer under his bunk. These he now found to have been undiscovered. He took out the negative and quickly made another print, the instantaneous-exposure sort. This he fixed, then spread on the blotter of his desk.

"See what you think of that, Danny." He handed him the lens.

Danny examined the print, then whistled softly.

"The guy in the tree is doubling for the boss, all right. Say, that skunk's all to the good, Mr. Johns. But that ain't Mrs. Williams peekin' out behind the tree."

"Well, who, then?"

"Lamp her hair," said Danny, ignoring the question. "Mrs. Williams parts her bob on the side. This dame's thatch ain't parted at all."

"Mightn't it be rumpled?" Anson asked.

Danny shook his head. "No, Mr. Johns; I've seen Mrs. Williams after she's been rough-housin' round and blown about in the swifty, and just out the water after a high dive off the ledge, but her mop don't change none. Women's hair ain't like men's. It gets trained like. This jane's hair ain't rumpled any. That's the way she wears it constant. Only for that, she favors Mrs. Williams a heap, I'll say."

Anson drew in his breath deeply. Iris, he reflected, had no part in her thick, wavy bob. It flowed back from her wide forehead in what, from the space between the waves, must be a natural wave rather than the close ripple of artificial undulation. Moreover, now that Danny called his attention to the detail, he noticed an inconspicuous widow's peak that Nona's hair did not possess.

"Have you ever seen Mrs. Williams' cousin, Miss Lloyd, Danny?"

"No, sir. She had went in when I roused out to look after the car last night. But I seen her picture on the mantelpiece. Now you remind me, I'd say this here dame is her."

Anson now thought so himself. It gave him for the moment one of those sinking sensations that most men experience at one time or another when confronted unexpectedly by what seems to them feline deception in a woman who has inspired admiration and trust at first sight. He thought of how Iris had listened absorbed to his statements, her misty gray eyes resting on his face

without the slightest trace of duplicity in their frank, level gaze.

Iris would know all about the business, Anson thought disgustedly, and whatever the solution of so bizarre an assembling of contradictory facts, Iris had it in her power all the time to set his mind at rest and to save him the wear and tear of trying to beat out the mystery.

It occurred to him then that if Iris really knew what it was all about she would scarcely have stood there mute while he and Slade held each other at pistol's points, all set for an act of manslaughter-suicide and needing scarcely more than the shock of a fallen leaf to empty their death-dealing weapons into each other.

Perhaps, Anson reflected, such an event might not have been entirely displeasing to this lovely, contradictory, inscrutable Iris. Her serene mind might have seen in the mutual destruction of the only two men in any way aware of what had happened, the closing of the opening in that unfortunate episode that threatened her future peace. One could never tell about a girl like that.

She stood apart, in the remote background of the ages, something unevoluted, with that vibrant beauty that was almost embryonic in its vigor. But the soul might be that of a savage, or worse, a pagan.

An idea striking him then, he asked Danny. "Do you know if Mrs. Williams told her husband that I was here aboard my yacht?"

"She did not, sir. More than that, when I heard the car and came up from the garage, Mrs. Williams wigwagged me to keep my mouth shut about your being here."

"Wigwagged?"

"As I came up the drive she pointed to your riding light and touched her lips. The boss asked who might that be, and she answered indifferent: 'Somebody cruising aboard a little schooner yacht.'"

Here was fresh food for thought. Anson could see no reason why Nona should wish to conceal the fact of his presence there, while there seemed every reason that she should not. Another woman might have wished to pique her husband's jealous suspicion, but Nona was above that. Anson and Jack Williams had remained friends, though after their freshman year as roommates they had agreed upon a sort of friendly divorce for incompatibility of temperament.

Their natures were, in fact, so antipodal temperamentally as to present every reason for good accord in the way of complementary parts. Jack Williams envied Anson the mental breadth that enabled him to extract from life a vast fund of enjoyment without doing anything wrong or silly, while Anson sometimes thought a little wistfully that it would be pleasant if he were able to infuse his occupational activities with a dash of romance now and then with no reproaches of hypersensitive ethical tyranny, as Jack did in his grand seignorial way.

But college carelessness, he now perceived, was apt to lead into crime in later life unless discarded with gown and mortar board. Or, if not actual crime, then complications that bordered it and were attended with an intensity of suffering to innocent persons to whom one was responsible. Something of this sort had happened now, Anson opined; and the girl Iris was mixed up in it, a witness if not actually a party to it.

"Danny," he said, "at the cost of gentlemanly rules and regulations, I want to ask you a few things."

"Shoot, sir," said Danny cheerfully.

"I'm an old friend of both Mr. and Mrs. Williams. I think the former is in a jam and his wife stands to pay the shot. I want to help them both, espe-

cially Mrs. Williams. I should say that you would go a long way to do the same."

"All the way to hell, sir, and take my chance on getting back."

"Well, then, did Mrs. Williams seem glad to see her husband?"

"Not that a guy like me could see, sir, and him no dumb-bell."

"Do you think that they're on the verge of a break-up?"

"Well, now, Mr. Johns, I'm no Prophet Daniel; but I'd say the writin' was on the wall. It's not grass the boss will be eatin', but mud."

"You seem to know your Bible."

"I done my daily dozen verses the last stretch in stir."

"Do you really think that Mr. Williams is backed up against the wall?"

"He's in a blind alley, sir. Somebody was running him close. But he did not get wise until just before we left this morning. Looks like he lamped this Slade guy you asked about just now."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because we paddled the swifty clear round the point before we started the engine, and for the first mile he barely turned it over."

"Do you believe his company has got a ship ashore and that he has gone down to see about it?"

Danny's forehead corrugated like that of the bulldog his face at times suggested. "That I cannot say, sir," he answered noncommittally.

Anson drummed on the desk with his fingers. Danny's eyes goggled about the snug cabin, took in its appointments, then passed from one to the other of some excellent sketches made by Anson and with which the bulkheads were decorated here and there. Danny's gaze rested on one of a fisherman cleaning fish in a dory with the greedy gulls about him in a swarm, almost snatching the cleanings from his fingers.

"Did you draw the picters, sir?" he asked.

"Yes. I write stories about birds and animals and things and illustrate them with photographs or sketches."

"Then if you're an artist, couldn't you give me a workin' plan of the map of this here Slade. His mug, I mean. If I could spot the guy, it would help; and there's not many top-kick dicks I don't know by sight, at least."

"Danny, you may be hard boiled—all but the head." Anson reached for a drawing block, picked up a pencil, and did a swift character sketch of Slade, emphasizing his cubical cast-iron qualities. Before he had finished it, Danny, watching over his shoulder, gave a little gurgle in his throat.

"'Tis him. The squareness of him—in shape, I mean. The rest is straight like a corkscrew."

"You know the man?"

"I mighta guessed. He give you his name backward. He's a guy known as Dales, and he is no dick, but a fancy yegg. He has the brains of a crow, that bird, and a part of them in each finger tip. Your little box would be to him a five-cent puzzle bought off a curb-stone hawker. Some time ago I heard he had quit the rough stuff for easier graft and better payin', if worked right."

"What?"

"Blackmail."

Anson nodded slowly. "Now we're getting somewhere. Not there, but somewhere. Now, Danny, do you think the man hanging in the crotch of the oak is the boss?"

"'Tis him, sir."

"Then how do you check it with the skunk at the foot of the tree? A man could not possibly hang still in that position more than a minute or two; and if he had not been absolutely still and motionless, the skunk would not be there."

Danny examined the print closely. "The skunk is sorta squattin', starin' up at him, Mr. Johns."

"Yes, as if it had just discovered him."

"I've heard tell," said Danny, "that a skunk when scairt swings round and brings his after battery to bear."

"That's right. But it looks to me as if this skunk had just discovered the man in the tree when the flash went off."

"Is the shutter of your camera quick, sir?"

"No, it's the flash that's quick."

"Then maybe this is what happened, Mr. Johns. For some reason known only to himself the boss climbed into the crotch. He was standin' there, unsecure like, when something or somebody set off the flash. He was startled like and fell."

Anson shook his head. "No. In that case the flash would have got him before he had time to fall."

"True for you, sir. Then maybe he just slipped and fell and the noise of him scairt something or somebody so that it jumped and set off the flash."

"That," said Anson, "is the first clear idea that's been extracted from this mess."

"The breath would be knocked out of him," said Danny, "and he would be jammed fast. For a second or two he could not move, and 'tis likely the skunk would beat it."

"Then how," Anson asked, "could he get out of there and on to the ground without so much as rumpling a leaf at the foot of the tree? I'm a poor hand at deduction, Danny; but I know my stuff, and a big branch of it is studying the ground for tracks. No foot, however light, had trod the wet leaves at the foot of that tree, let alone a man with his inside squeezed half to death scrambling down."

Danny's eyes goggled at him and his forehead was a mass of little corrugations. Presently he said: "Leave us go over and give it the oncet-over, sir."

"Come on."

Anson got up. They went on deck, got into the dinghy and rowed over, not to the float but to the shore at a point directly under the scene of the mystery. They saw nobody on their way, and, arriving at the spot, Danny took the initiative. He recognized immediately the setting as shown in the photograph.

"Now, Mr. Johns, do you stand there behind the pine. Leave me try if I can show you what's in my head."

Anson obeyed. His respect for this little ex-gangster, sailor at some time, second-story worker, and finally piece of salvage through the clear vision of Nona, was mounting to that degree that the amateur motorist or flyer feels for the grime-smeared expert machinist who like a skilled surgeon takes the pulse and temperature of the stricken mechanism, diagnoses its disease, and in a few deft strokes with his implements of craft corrects it.

Danny approached the forked oak with catlike steps, and with some difficulty, for he was not a tall man like Jack Williams, got a foot in the crotch, seized the trunk and hauled himself up. There was above the fork a knot where a dead spike had been broken off. Danny laid his finger on this round abrasion.

"He stood on that prong, sir, and it broke with him. Did you think of that?"

Anson felt crestfallen. "No, I didn't." He walked up to the tree. "It was dead, and as it was wet, I didn't notice that it had recently been broken off."

"There it is at your feet, sir. Leave me look."

Anson picked up the stump about six inches long and handed it to Danny who fitted the fragment to where it had broken away.

"A guy standin' on that was takin' a chance. The flash light goes off and he jumps and comes down on the run. Like this."

Danny did not illustrate this fall with all its graphic detail. Letting his feet go out through one side of the fork and clinging to the cleft trunk, he lowered his body till the crotch gripped him just above the hips, then let his torso fall forward, arms dangling, the back of his head presenting to where the camera had been.

"That's it," Anson exclaimed. "The flash got him before he could move."

"Not so good," Danny gurgled. "And now fur gettin' out."

He managed to squirm partly on his side, got a knee in the crotch, thrust his body up by gripping the trunk with both hands, and continued to raise himself in this way until in a kneeling posture he could reach up to where there was a short live branch by means of which he gained a standing position. Just above there was a longer branch that jutted out horizontally, and this Danny now grasped in both hands.

"A man does not like to risk droppin' down where there may be a skunk all cleared for action, sir. Having dropped his torch, he could not be sure was the creature still there. So he does the like of this."

For the first time Anson had the satisfaction of seeing at least one of his theories—in fact, the only one—demonstrated. Danny passed himself out along the stout, strong limb hand over hand. It bent more and more under his weight until finally, near the extremity, Danny's feet were within twenty-eight inches from the ground. Jack Williams' taller and heavier figure would have made the contact, Anson perceived, and at a point where the fallen pine needles mixed in a dense mulch with the sodden oak leaves.

Even as it was, Danny's drop of over two feet left so slight a trace that the average person scanning the ground would not have been arrested by it. To Anson's skilled eye it was conspicuous enough, but his woodcraft told him also that it would not be discernible after a few hours.

"This stuff is springy like a mattress and pushes slowly back in place," he said to Danny. "Add to that a drizzle and, unless one had scuffled, there'd be nothing to see."

"The boss would be treadin' light as a cat, sir," Danny said.

"But why?" Anson demanded. "What brought him here, anyhow? And why did he get up in that tree?"

Danny looked at him with a sort of reproach. "Now, Mr. Johns—and you a man of the woods. Ask me somethin' hard."

"I know I'm dumb, Danny. This thing scrambled my brain at the start. They're completely stalled. Self-starter won't work."

"Leave me crank them, then. Did I not just tell you that the boss knew nothin' of your bein' here?"

"Yes."

"Then he'd know nothin' of your settin' up a fillum studio here. Now how come you did that same, sir?"

"Because before I'd talked to her very long Mrs. Williams asked me to trap the skunks. She said they tried to come into the house."

"There's not much scare in a skunk. On a still, damp night like that past they do not need to be at war to lay down a gas attack. The boss is a nervous man, and last night he was nervouser. It is likely Mrs. Williams' door was closed to him, as I saw the light from the corner guest-room window of the wing. Miss Lloyd was billeted in the room correspondin' of the wing opposite."

"What's that got to do with it?" Anson asked.

"I'm askin' you to bear it in mind, sir. Now there was a faint draft of air from southeast, and that would bring the perfume from this zoo to Mr. Williams. What more natural in his state of nerves than that he should take

his gat and a torch and go on a skunk raid."

"Gosh!" said Anson.

"I have read," said Danny, "that the nerviest of big-game hunters in Injia get up a tree when tiger huntin' at night. And there are men would rather face a tiger than a skunk. 'Tis likely the boss knew the location of the den, and he clum this tree to play safe as might be and keep out of range."

Anson said a little bitterly: "You're a good kindergarten teacher, Danny. My mind was groping after something hard."

"Like most amachoor dicks," Danny said, "and story writers, with their bunk about master minds."

"Lesson II," Anson said with acrid self-scorn. "Now where does Miss Lloyd come in behind the tree?"

"That's easy, too, if you don't think too hard," Danny said. "She is worried about the way things are breakin'. She knows the boss, with all his skirt-chasin', to be dippy about his wife, and she knows Mrs. Williams has given him the gate. Miss Lloyd is worried which way the boss may jump and watches him as close as may be.

"Now, if he wants to go out quiet and easy, all he has to do is step through his window and go down the logs like you would go down a ladder. Miss Lloyd watches from her window and sees him do this. Perhaps she gets the glint of the gun. She may fear that he means to walk into the woods and look his gat in the snoot, so she follows. She is peerin' from behind the pine when the flash comes."

"What could they have thought it was?" Anson asked.

"It's likely Miss Lloyd would have guessed, sir. The chances are that Mrs. Williams had told her that you were here, and that if she dreamed she was in a Bowery street car on a soft day in March, she should remember that you had promised to deport them white-striped sables. It is only in the last few days they have got so bold and penetratin'. Perhaps it is a large family of young uns growed up and engagin' in sham battles. As for the boss, the flash came as he landed in the crotch, the wind knocked out of him, and shocked. So he may have thought it one of them bright flares of light that come with a master wallop."

"Possibly," Anson admitted. "Your stuff is good, Danny. Let's cut, now, and screen the villain of the piece—this wolverine of a Slade, or Dales."

"Have a try yourself, sir," Danny said. "If my guessin' up to now is good, then the rest should not be hard."

"No, and what you've said makes sense. Slade has got something on Mr. Williams and wants to sell it to him. But the transaction has got to be made in person and for cash; so Slade, who was shadowing Jack Williams, followed him and Miss Lloyd here. Skulking round last night, he saw the flash and wondered what it was about. He followed Miss Lloyd and myself when we came here at noon, and hid behind that ledge in the hope of hearing what we might say. Then he saw her find the pistol and hand it to me, and he tried to bluff me out of it."

"Where did she find the pistol, sir?" Danny asked.

"In the bayberry there, beside where you dropped off the branch."

Danny nodded. "After his squeeze in the crotch, the boss would not feel up to much gymnastics, so instead of swingin' by an arm only, he hooked his legs over the limb. The gun slipped out and bounced into the bushes, and him swingin'."

"Like a sloth," Anson said, "upside down. He went back to the house then, and soon as dawn came he took his grip and went to the garage and got you, and the two of you slipped down to the landing and shoved off. Somehow, Slade missed this."

"He would be in the woods hunting for a body," Danny said. "It is likely he saw Miss Lloyd going back, took her for Mrs. Williams, and jumped to the conclusion that here was another husband killing in high life. That would make his other blackmail look like the poor box in a Bowery mission. He would say, 'Here is at least a hundred grand waitin' to be collected.'"

"You never miss a trick, Danny. That's why he was so determined to get the gun. And when, like a fool, I told him about the photograph he went after it at the first break that offered. What do you think he's done with my crew?"

"Flashed his phony badge and told them they were under arrest, sir. With you all at lunch and me away, he took the rowboat and went off to your yacht and gathered in these squareheads and took them off somewhere in his car. Ride out and walk home. When he got that print he says to himself, 'I am a made man.'"

"All the same, it must have puzzled him. A dead man hanging from a crotch and a skunk squatting at the foot of it looking up at the corpse and a woman's face peering out from behind a tree. What the devil would he make of it?"

"Not so hard, sir. He would say, 'The wife beat me to it, but this is better. She will shake down for all she's got, and that's enough to keep a guy from want.'"

"I don't get you."

"Now, Mr. Johns," said Danny patiently, "must I spell it out? The print would tell this here Dales or Slade the whole story, and it not true. Have we not just been over the ground?"

"I see," said Anson disgustedly. "I seem to go from bad to worse. He'd say, 'Williams slipped over here to kill a skunk, and to play safe, he got up the tree. His wife followed him and got him from behind the pine. The glare of light I saw was from her torch when she fired. This print tells the whole story. It's worth just about all the money the widow's got coming to her.'"

"Now you have said it, sir."

"Well, it took a lot of coaching," Anson said wearily. "That brings us to another point. Why was Slade so sure that you did not take Mr. Williams to Rockland?"

Danny grinned cheerfully. "Well, sir, partly because I did not."

"What's that?"

Danny ignored the question. "Slade thought that was a bluff on the part of Mrs. Williams. He was sure that she had made away with her husband. It is certain he saw Miss Lloyd go back into the house alone. Perhaps he thought you had a part in it and took the body in charge. At any rate he now thinks he has a fortune by the tail, if he plays his cards careful. Mrs. Williams will be hearin' from him very soon now."

"Where did you take Mr. Williams?" Anson asked.

"I am disobeyin' orders, sir; but never mind. It was to one of them islands out beyond. There's a shack or two on it used by the fishermen in the winter. The boss is lyin' low to shake off this blackmailin' son."

"Why that? It doesn't sound like Jack Williams. That sort of thing isn't usually in his line."

"He is in a tight jam, sir." Danny's battered face was turned eagerly up to Anson. "I tell you, Mr. Johns, with all his philanderin', there is only one woman for whom the boss cares the snap of his fingers, and that is his wife. There are some men who cannot resist a drink, knowin' well what it will do to them, and there are others would sell their souls for a jab of hop or a sniff of snow. There are still others who, no matter how much in love with the one woman, cannot pass up another, if the break catches them just right. Mr.

Williams is that kind. He will get over it—maybe—when it is too late."

Anson pondered this statement. Danny's finding bore out the analogy that he had offered Nona the night before of the hound that could not resist breaking its trail but which invariably returned to it after a brief pursuit of the hotter scent in its nostrils. Jack Williams must have been trying to evade the blackmailer, then caught sight of him that morning. Anson could understand the motive of this act, at first sight pusillanimous. A blackmailer, like a process server, must, to be effective, have access to his victim.

Slade, an astute scoundrel, was no doubt fully informed as to Williams' domestic relations. But until Slade was able to say personally to Williams, "I have in my possession the means to destroy your home, smash your social position, and ruin you; and unless you come across, this evidence goes into the hands of your wife"—until the blackmailer could offer this ultimatum, Jack Williams had nothing immediately to fear. Slade was not acting in spite but for money. Aside from this, nothing interested the man less than the blasting of his victim's life.

Perhaps Jack, a spender, could not at the moment lay his hands on the price of silence. He desired to gain time, to build up his defenses, or to find the ransom money for all he held most dear.

Anson's mind returned to Iris. He wondered what she really believed to be the truth about the situation. She must know that Jack had not been killed. She must have listened with secret amusement to Anson's assurance that no corpse could have been got out of that crotch without disturbing the ground—and that it would not be easy for a live man to have managed it.

A gust of anger against the girl submerged Anson. She might have helped him. He wondered why she had not done so, when he was acting in his capacity of old friend of both parties concerned in this unhappy tangle.

Once again Anson turned to Danny for help. "Do you think Miss Lloyd knows what this man Slade is really after?"

Danny shook his head. "No, sir. The chances are she thinks Slade is what he claims to be—a dick."

"He told us that he was detailed to guard Williams against assassination," Anson said.

"Well, she might believe him, at that," Danny said. "Likely she knows the boss for the sort of man that might be needin' a guy to keep him from gettin' bumped off. But I think it more likely she would believe the boss to be wanted by the bulls."

"When are you going to see Mr. Williams again?" Anson asked.

"To-night, sir. I'm to take him out some grub and blankets and things."

"Look here, Danny—what if I tell Mrs. Williams the way things stand and do what I can to get him a pardon."

"That's up to you, sir. But you don't know how deep he is in. That lady is proud."

"Perhaps I can persuade her to go to him—give him a chance to square himself."

Danny shook his head. "He had that chance last night, and it was no good. That was the thing that brought him back."

"Well," said Anson wearily, "there's nothing to do, for the moment. You go back to the garage and I'll go off aboard and wait for my fool crew to show up."

"Very good, sir."

Danny set off through the woods. Anson went back down the slope to the shore. He shoved off the dinghy and stepped aboard. Then, as he was picking up the oars, the landing came in sight round the curve of the ledges.

Two figures were standing on the float. Anson immediately discovered them to be Iris and the blackmailer Dales, alias Slade.

CHAPTER IV.

A MODERN SAVAGE MAID.

ANSON swung the dinghy in her briny tracks and headed for the float, where Iris appeared to be talking calmly enough with Slade. In the meeting of these two, Anson immediately perceived a contretemps that might already have proved fatal to a vague course of strategy that was forming in his mind.

Once again he had blundered, Anson feared, with bitter self-reproach. His keenness of observation should have detected the true identity of the woman in the photograph, and his wit should have been sharp enough to realize the advantage to be gained by Slade's having made the same error. Anson, on discovering that the print had been taken from the safe by Slade, should have lost no time in telling Iris what had happened, and instructing her to impersonate Nona if approached by Slade.

He wondered now if Iris had spilled that precious basket of beans. Possibly not, in which case there was still hope, provided Slade had not yet caught sight of Nona. Iris was not the sort to spill anything at all. As Anson now pulled up alongside the float she glanced at him with a faint, inscrutable smile. Her lovely face wore its usual expression of unruffled serenity. She had put on a jersey dress that depicted admirably the strength and grace of the sort of proportions that stand as the symbol of womanhood throughout the ages.

Anson was relieved to discover no evidence of any clash, so far. One would have said that Iris and Slade were having a friendly little talk about some mildly interesting local topic. Slade looked at Anson with his down-drawn smile and a gleam of mockery in eyes that were of a curious iron-rust color with darker flecks in them.

"Mr. Slade," said Iris to Anson, "is a very interesting man. He tells me that he was once a crook, but saw the error of his ways—or, to be more exact, the unprofitableness. So now he has given the value of his criminal experience to the suppression of crime."

"The good old movie stuff," Anson said, and made fast his painter. "What have you done with my crew, Slade?"

"Took 'em for a little ride in the country, Mr. Johns," Slade said in his harsh but not unpleasant voice. "I felt I ought to overhaul your cabin a mite."

"I've discovered that. Are my idiots coming back?"

"Oh, yes, I guess so. I rode them into town and told them to wait there until I came back with you."

"That," said Anson, "is apt to be a long wait."

"Yes," Slade admitted. "When we don't show up they're apt to come straggling in."

"And in the meantime," Anson said, "you thought you'd like a little talk with Mrs. Williams."

"I've just been having that," said Slade. "But she don't seem to believe what I been trying to tell her. Maybe you better back me up in my claim that I've got something worth quite a lot to her. To you too, maybe, Mr. Johns."

To conceal the relief he felt on finding that Slade had actually mistaken Iris for Nona Williams, and still operated in this error, Anson stepped up onto the float, and made fast the painter of the dinghy. It now occurred to him that Slade might have been all along in the error that Jack Williams was returning to the camp not with his wife's cousin but with his wife herself. Slade, in his shadowing of Jack, had no doubt been in this error from the time when Jack had joined Iris in Boston to drive to his camp.

"Why don't you show her the print

you took from my safe?" Anson asked. "She doesn't have to be from Missouri."

"It don't happen to be on me," Slade said.

"Well, I've made another, so I can show it to her now. But I warn you, Slade, that there are some people who don't shake down worth a cent. Mrs. Williams here is one of them."

Iris gave him a deep look. "Just as there are some men who are not hold-upable, Mr. Slade."

"I guess," said Slade, "that neither one of you quite guess what this would mean."

Anson shook his head. "You're wasting your time, Slade. You ought really to know enough about the court procedure of a murder case to be aware that there really isn't any without a corpus delicti. You might have a whole five-reel picture of Mr. Williams going out to shoot a skunk and Mrs. Williams going out to shoot Mr. Williams and getting him. But until you can produce the game, that is to say the body of Mr. Williams, the court will merely say 'interesting if true.'"

Slade looked puzzled. Iris said impatiently. "Let's see your old nature picture, Anson."

Anson took the print from his pocket and handed it to her. She studied it intently. Anson, watching Slade, was amused at the bewilderment in the blackmailer's face. Where Slade had expected horror, consternation, stricken guilt, here instead was the lovely face of his potential victim as unruffled as the still water of the bay.

"I don't get this at all," she said. "If as Mr. Slade claims, I shot him from behind the tree, what's the skunk doing there? And who set off the flash?"

"Slade," Anson explained, "argues, no doubt, that I might have been there and set off my flash, since I was the photographer. He may claim that we persuaded Jack to go out there and get in the tree so that you could pot him. And that the photograph was rigged for an alibi. Mrs. Williams," he looked at Slade, "was presumably shooting at the skunk. But the camera got slued and included Jack hanging in the crotch, which was something we hadn't counted on—hadn't counted on at all. Am I right, Slade?"

The blackmailer's cast-iron face looked more like a lyric mask depicting astonishment. "Well, something like that," he muttered.

"Whatever it's worth," Anson said, "there's this much about it. No live man would be hanging like that in a fork of a tree, and as nobody else is missing hereabouts, it must be the body of Jack Williams. Besides, that's the light homespun coat he was wearing last night, and the hair checks up. So we'll say it's Jack."

A peculiar noise came from Iris. Slade stared at her and gaped. Even Anson was a little astonished to discover that the girl was struggling with her mirth. She stifled it, then looked at Slade with limpid eyes.

"Some shot, you must admit, Mr. Slade, to get a man in a tree in the flash of a magnesium powder."

Puzzled, mystified, but suddenly aware that these two young people were in some way making a joke of him, the criminality in Slade flared up suddenly. His face darkened and he ripped out an ugly curse. It was not a mere expletive but a coarse anathema directed at them both.

The next instant Slade was floundering in the icy water. Anson, roused suddenly from his scholarly calm by Slade's underworld abuse, would have struck the man and taken a chance on what might follow. But before he could get set, Iris' strong hands fell on Slade's shoulder and her lithe but powerful body swayed against him as she thrust out with both arms. Slade, unbalanced, could offer no resistance.

Once in motion, Iris propelled him to the edge of the float and overboard.

He came up spluttering and grabbed at the rim of the float. Iris stooped down over him, her face aflame.

"You blackmailing swine," she said between her teeth, "I'll teach you to come here trying to wreck a home. We stood you as long as you were polite, but now you've done yourself in. Anson, give me an oar."

The girl's fury appalled Anson even more than her act had done. "Hold on," he said. "We mustn't kill the brute."

"Why not? Many a better man's been rightly killed for less. Give me that oar."

The stark passion of her struck Anson aghast. He was relieved then to see Danny running down the stone steps to the float. In a danger crisis of some clean and vigorous sort, caught on a lee shore in a sudden gale, a forest fire, or even in a clash with desperadoes who were frankly out for loot, Anson would have wished to run his own show, decide on the action to be taken. But this affair was different, more like dealing with something out of a slimy cavern than with dangerous denizens that inhabit the open spaces. This was a case of a flying reptile from the underworld, and it seemed to need a sort of licensed pilot of those nether regions to set the course.

Danny had already got their position from his close cross bearings on such landmarks as were visible, and should therefore be able to get them somewhere. It did not seem to Anson that people of Iris' class and his own were justified in abating a dangerous human pest by shoving it off a float, then braining it with an oar, however great its virulence. Danny, he hoped, would have a better expedient to suggest and to act upon. But this reformed alumnus of a State reformatory must be made instantly aware of the joker they held at this crucial moment, which was Slade's error in the real identity of Iris.

Wherefore, as Danny bounced off the long, springy runway onto the float, Anson said in the academic tone for which his friends often guyed him:

"Danny, this man Dales has just made the tactical error of speaking to Mrs. Williams and myself as if we were in his own low criminal class. Mrs. Williams lost her temper and shoved him overboard, and now desires to brain him with an oar."

It did not need the wink that went with this statement to put the alert mind of the ex-gangster in touch with the situation. Danny turned his goggle eyes on Slade, or Dales, clinging to the edge of the float.

"He's got it comin', I'll tell the graftin' world," Danny said. "But what's the use? The guy ain't got nothin' on the boss Mrs. Williams here don't know. The boss came clean to her last night. He told me so."

Iris looked round at the two men. "That's true enough. But all the same, the brute isn't fit to live."

Danny went to the edge of the float and dropped on his hands and knees. "Leave me frisk him, first. Then we can haul him aboard and tell him where he gets off. We got enough on him now to shove him for a long shift in stir. Blackmail, impersonatin' a dick, arrestin' Mr. Johns' crew and robbin' his safe. That's piracy. Turn round, guy, or I'll shove your bean under and drowned ye."

He took one of Slade's wrists and twisted the man so that his back was against the side of the float. Slade's face showed a fright that it might not have betrayed at any such predicament on solid ground. Plainly enough, the water was an element in which he found himself an utter alien.

"Hold the big bum be the wristses while I see what he's got onto him, Mr.

Johns," Danny said. "Maybe we don't need to kill him any."

Anson obeyed. Slade did not struggle. It looked as if he were more in dread of the chill, wet void in which his feet dangled free than of any violence or future punishment. His impulse was even to draw his body a little higher in Anson's strong grip. Danny, lying prone on the float, passed his deft hands over the man's body, secured the pistol slung under his left arm, then explored his pockets. He drew out something that tinkled musically and tossed it onto the planks—a pair of steel handcuffs.

"Can ye beat it?" Danny asked. "Now ain't he the forehanded crook in cop's clothin'? Have we got a use for them bracelets? I'll say we have."

He slipped one, then the other of the light manacles onto the hairy wrists held by Anson. Even then Slade did not struggle. Any chance, it was evident, looked to him at that moment better them to be let sink. He could not swim, and it was by the sheer instinct of terror that he had managed to flounder close enough to grab the rim of the float.

Danny hooked both hands under his armpits and heaved him up so that he sat on the edge. Slade gave an inarticulate growl of relief. Anson glanced at Iris and was puzzled at the expression on her face as she stared down at the dripping figure. It had lost the flash of violence that had for a brief instant possessed it, but if anything the look it now held was more fatal than when she had demanded the oar.

"Listen, guy," Danny said, leaning over Slade. "Your act is crabbed, and all you stand to get for it is the hook."

Slade twisted round a little. "I'm too old for bedtime stories, bo," he growled. "I got proof this dame killed her husband. It's in a safe place, and if I don't get it over, there's another bird that will."

Danny straightened up and looked at Anson. "Seein's believin', Mr. Johns. What if we show this mutt the boss, him appearin' personal after the fillum show? It ain't so far."

"What's that?" Iris asked.

"Come on, Mrs. Williams," Danny said. "Let's go. We can make it in the swifty and be back in time for dinner. The lot of us."

Anson had caught the idea, or at least a part of it. He had been keeping a wary eye on the path up to the house, to intercept Nona, should she take it into her head to scout round in search of them. Danny's suggestion now struck him as sound.

"Perhaps you're right, Danny," he said. "He might as well see for himself that his job here isn't worth the sentence he'd surely get if he tries to go on with it."

Danny gripped Slade by the shoulder. "Come on, you bum, and let's hope you get pneumonia and save the State expense."

Slade, mystified, struggled to his feet. Danny shoved him toward the speed craft that was rubbing gently against the pleated fire-hose fender on the other side of the float. Anson took the puzzled Iris by the elbow and guided her to the after seat, taking his place beside her. Danny thrust Slade into the place beside that of the driver, cast off forward and after painters, slid in behind the wheel, and jammed at the self-starter.

The fine, high-powered engine gave out its deep-toned airplane thrum. They glided out of the sheltered cove, rounded the natural breakwater that loomed high with trailing skirts of rockweed—for the tide was far out—and then, with broad wings of white water far reaching on either side, rushed over the smooth but undulating surface at the road speed of a good car.

"What's all this about?" Iris asked Anson, in a tone that Slade could not

possibly hear above the rush of water and vibration of the engine.

"Jack's out here on an island."

"Why that?"

"To shake off this accursed blackmailer for the moment, I suppose."

"Then it was all bunk about his ship aground?"

"Yes. Why did you keep me in the dark, Iris?"

"I'd rather not tell you—just yet."

"Then I'll make a guess. You think that I've been in love with Nona all this time, and have kept it to myself because Jack is my friend. You love Nona as much as you despise Jack, and you have her future happiness at heart. You wanted her to divorce Jack and marry me. Am I right?"

"You're warm, Anson. Go on."

"You thought that if I were obliged to admit that Jack must have been killed, I'd have felt no longer under any obligation not to make love to Nona, and possibly persuade her that she could build up her life again and be happy with me. Then, when I learned that Jack was still alive, we might both go through with it. She'd divorce him and marry me. Was that your idea?"

"Yes," Iris said. "Nona has always been fond of you."

"Well, then, I fooled you. I was sure he hadn't been killed. But it took Danny to show me the workings of it."

"This creature in front of us," Iris said, "has evidently seen Nona. He took me for her. He came here to blackmail Jack into keeping me from seeing whatever sort of evidence he got hold of. I can't imagine what it may be. Jack's too wary a bird to write letters—too experienced. But when this Slade, or whatever he calls himself, jumped to the conclusion that I had killed my husband, he saw the chance for even more profitable blackmail. Once he'd got the photograph, he was sure."

Anson nodded. "And now that he is due to see Jack in the flesh, and believes you to be Jack's wife, he must be made to believe that Jack has made a clean breast of all that Slade has collected evidence about. But even that doesn't get Jack out of the woods. There's still the public—his friends and associates."

"I've thought of that," Iris said. "But as Danny points out, we've got enough to have this beast put safely away."

"Perhaps we can strike a bargain," Anson suggested.

Iris shook her head. "How could we be sure that he might not be holding something back?"

"Well, then what?"

The girl did not answer. Presently she said: "As soon as we get to the island where our beautiful Jack is skulking, you must manage to tip him off about me. Then find out what this cast-iron devil's got. Looks a bit rusted, doesn't he?"

She gave a little laugh that Anson did not like. Since his landing on the float where Iris and Slade were talking, Iris had seemed invested with some quality that troubled Anson. Her flash of rage had been natural. It was not that gusty violence that appalled him, but the look about her misty gray eyes as they had rested on the man.

Both Nona and Iris were unusual types, Anson now reflected. He remembered that their maternal grandfather had been one Judge Lloyd of a Gulf State, that his name had been the nightmare of malefactors, and that he had reduced to a minimum the crime under his jurisdiction while he had exercised office. "The hangin' jedge," and "ole Jedge Gallers" were two of his sobriquets. Anson had heard tales of this stern jurist—how he ruled his court like a "Bloody Jeffries," but unlike that devil-and-disease-tormented man, was the Nemesis only of proven criminality. Out of court, Judge Lloyd had been acclaimed for his benevolence.

Anson wondered now if perhaps these two cousins might not have inherited a strain of that hatred for criminals that had rendered their progenitor so implacable. Perhaps, also, it might be something in the personality of the criminal that roused in their natures that instinctive animosity of dog for wolf.

As if her mind was traveling on the same avenue of thought, Iris said:

"Nona and I inherit our traits from the Lloyds. Our grandfather, Judge Lloyd, used to urge capital punishment for armed thieves. Failing that, he tried hard to get his State to put a bounty on dead ones, killed in the act. If a bandit or burglar shot anybody in committing his felony, it was good night for that thug. The judge used to say:

" 'Thieves are mean, ornery varmints, and ought to be killed out. Burglars are the meanest, because they go out prepared to plunge a home in tragedy and grief, slaughter the husband and father, bring ruin to that family, for the sake of a few dollars earned by an honest man.' "

"I wonder what he would have said about a blackmailer?" Anson asked.

"It's not hard to guess. He'd have said that a blackmailer ought never get the chance to befoul the court—that his victim had a right to wipe him out."

"The judge was right," Anson said. "You might scare up a little false sentiment of romance about a picturesque burglar who takes a chance, even if the odds are in his favor. But nobody, even in fiction, has ever had the nerve to try to glorify a blackmailer."

Iris nodded. "Modern society has got a tough stomach, but that stuff can't rest on it. Why should they be let live? You might get a repentant thief, but you can't imagine a repentant blackmailer any more than you can imagine a repentant shark. It's the nature of the beast. So why stall along with them?"

"The argument is sound," Anson admitted; "but I don't quite see how to apply it in the present case."

"Why not?" A straight line drew itself down the middle of Iris' wide forehead.

"Because it is not the nature of people like ourselves to kill in cold blood. Not even to prevent the domestic tragedy of those dear to us."

"I don't suggest that *we* kill him," Iris said. "The moment for that has passed. But Jack would be justified."

Anson shook his head. "Jack wouldn't—and I doubt any good would come of it. Such talk is wild, Iris. Do you propose that we land this man, then say to Jack: 'Here's your persecutor. It's up to you to silence him?'

"Not precisely. Why not just set this man ashore and go back. Put it up to Jack. No reason why we should do his dirty work. If it were only Jack, I shouldn't have come this far. It's Nona I'm thinking about."

Anson did not answer. He could see no way out of the cul-de-sac. Slade, discovering Jack Williams to be still alive, would of course abandon his hope of blackmailing a woman for the murder of her husband. Believing Iris to be Mrs. Williams and that her husband had confessed his offense, whatever that might be, he would now make a threat of public exposure.

But even if they were to leave the man on the island at the mercy of his victim, Anson knew that Jack Williams would take no radical course to free himself from the toils. There was no such ruthless fiber in Jack. He was by nature tolerant, easy-going, generous and with none of the harshness that is apt to be associated with excessive masculinity.

His acts of misbehavior were, Anson had often thought, those of the laughing faun rather than of the dominant male. Also they would appear to be the results of impulse and a total

lack of any power of self-restraint. He was like a powerful machine, an engine for which the designing engineer had omitted to install a governor. Or if there was any, then its action was too long delayed.

Jack would be repentant, no doubt survey with horrified amazement the havoc wrought by his self-indulgence. But destroy even the most detestable of human creatures that had snared him in his noose? Never.

The speed craft laid down a long, white band on the jade smoothness of the sea. The fog had risen a few hundred feet above the surface and the midsummer sun was now burning through it, thinning its opacity to shed a bright but shadowless light. A sun dog glared out abeam. Farther out ahead the drop curtain hung lower to hide their objective, so that Danny was steering a compass course. He had, Anson learned afterward, once held a quartermaster's billet aboard a big yacht.

They had sighted a few private launches close in to the shore, but none would venture to the outlying islands until the weather was definitely cleared by a shift of wind. Even then there was slight chance of anybody landing on these barren sea islands because of the constant wash on their rocky shores.

From ahead, the speed craft would suggest a mammoth dragon fly skimming the surface, the thin, widespread sheets of water flung out on either side like wings of gauze. It devoured the distance avidly. An irregular streak of blue appeared against the jade-green sea ahead. It rose with amazing swiftness to a man unaccustomed to such speed in boats. A long, sluggish swell was bursting in white explosions on the ledges off the eastern end, but the shoreward side of the island was shoal, Anson knew, with a crescent-shaped bay. Coming in aboard his ketch, he had noticed it on the chart.

"A good place for Jack," Iris muttered in his ear. "Pity it isn't in the middle of the Pacific."

"Perhaps he wishes that it was," Anson said, "and that he had Nona there with him. I had you all wrong, Iris. I thought you'd come to work for a reconciliation."

"No fear. I came because she wired me that she was all alone. If I'd known that you were here, I'd have stayed away. But now I'm glad I came."

"So am I," Anson said. "Perhaps I was in love with Nona, but if so I've got in the habit of thinking of her as Jack's wife. I doubt if I could change that now."

There was no time to pursue what seemed to Anson a futile discussion. The speed craft skimmed in on the island, slowing gradually as the water shoaled. The tide was far out, but starting to flow, as Anson observed from the slant of a black spar buoy. They approached a beach. With the engine barely turning over, the speed craft drew scarcely more than eighteen inches, and the pitch of the beach was steep enough for Danny to ground the bow so that they could step ashore in water ankle-deep. He jumped out with the anchor and carried it up until its line came taut, then jammed it behind a stone.

Anson stepped over the side into the water. "Come on," he said to Iris. "I'll carry you ashore."

She smiled and permitted this service. Anson was a little breathless as he sat her down above the zone of wet sandy ooze that was yet firm enough. As he did so there came a shout of astonishment from the top of the low cliffs that flanked the beach. Jack Williams came striding down. His handsome face was pale.

"What's happened?" he cried. "Is Nona——" He seemed unable to go on.

"Nona's all right," Iris said shortly.

"No thanks to you. Whether or not she keeps on that way depends on how much of a man you are, Jack Williams."

"Who's that fellow in the boat?" Jack demanded.

"A low crook that came to blackmail you——"

"Slade?" Jack's face froze with horror. "Why the devil have you brought him here? He's the brute I'm trying to lose."

"Listen, stupid," Iris said tensely. "He thinks I'm Nona, and that you have made a clean breast of the whole rotten business to me. We've told him that, but he may still have some doubts. To convince him, you had better tell me again, in his presence. Make it perfectly certain to him that I am your wife and that I know it all."

A dull crimson spread over Jack's face. "Must I do that?"

"You must. Don't you see that it will kill the value of his blackmail, so far as Nona's concerned? We'll bring him ashore and you can come through with it. Then you can go back to your shanty and talk things over with Anson. He will tell you all that's happened, and you two can try to study out some way to keep this animal from broadcasting your dirt. Nona has got to be saved that."

"Bring Slade ashore, Danny," Anson said.

Danny did not bother to escort the prisoner. "Come ashore, youse," he called.

Slade, handcuffed but footloose, swung his legs overside, slid down, and walked up to where the others were standing. His square face had regained its set look, and he did not appear to be suffering from chill. The day was warm, humid, and the wind shield had protected him from the rush of air.

He said sullenly: "You win. Then who was it hanging in that tree?"

"My husband," Iris said calmly. "That picture was not a time exposure, Slade. It was taken in the flash, and it got Mr. Williams just as he fell. Before he had time to struggle. We think it was his falling that startled another skunk so that it got tangled in the trigger cord—or however the thing works."

Slade gave his head a jerk. "Well, then that's out. It's him."

"It's all out," Iris said, "and you will soon be in. My husband has told me everything." She gave Jack a level look. "Haven't you?"

Jack looked dazed, but he kept his cue in mind. With a crimson face he said jerkily: "Everything." He looked at Slade. "She knows all about that Roman orgy at the lake on the Smith estate, and my behavior with the woman I took out there. She knows how you worked in with the woman to set up your apparatus and get the exposure and slip off into the woods with it. I've explained that I was the goat, and that the picture couldn't be worse, and she has advised me to let you go ahead with your dirty work and take the consequences. We stand pat on that."

Anson scarcely dared look at Iris. He ventured then to glance at her face. It showed no shock at all, nor the slightest change of color. But there was that fatal expression about the eyes, though their gaze as they rested on Slade was steady, serene.

"So you see, Slade," she said quietly, "your goods have no longer any market."

"Maybe," Slade muttered.

Iris turned to Anson. "You seem to have a confrère in Mr. Slade, Anson. Another expert in nature photography—who wanted to add a picture of skunks at their nocturnal activities to his collection. Well, we shall have to see what can be done about that."

"The stuff's for sale," Slade said. "All he's got to do is come across."

"Go get your things, Jack, dear," Iris said. "No use hiding out any longer. Don't hurry back. I want to have a

nice long talk with Mr. Slade, and I'd rather it shouldn't be interrupted. Skip along."

Anson took his erring and bewildered friend by the elbow and led him back up the rocks, toward a fisherman's shack that now became visible about a quarter of a mile away, at the southwest corner of the island. When they were out of sight of the beach, Jack stopped.

"What's happened?" he asked. "Where did you collar that ruffian?"

"Come on," Anson said, "I'll tell you as we go along."

They proceeded on their way. Anson described slowly and clearly the whole series of events, from the moment of his arrival in the place. Jack listened moodily.

"Then Nona doesn't know a thing," he said, as Anson finished.

"No, and she mustn't. We can manage to get rid of Slade without his seeing her. But what then? He still has this rotten stuff on you."

"It's awful," Jack groaned. "We were all crazy drunk when this wild girl I'd lugged out there suggested a swim in the lake. It was dark as pitch. You can imagine what happened."

"The trouble is," said Anson, "that nobody may have to imagine it. Slade's got the photographic record."

"This girl was working with him. They picked me, though there were richer chaps in the crowd. She knew that, down underneath, I was crazy about my wife."

"A long way underneath," Anson muttered.

"I must be crazy," Jack said. "Smith's wife was in Newport, and we all went out to his place for a harmless spree. Then we got full of bootleg, and after that anything might happen."

"Evidently it did," Anson said. "The question now is what to do about it."

"The devil of it is," Jack groaned, "I don't know how I'm going to raise the price. The market turned against me a couple of weeks ago. I've been spending like a drunken sailor, and my credit's none too good."

"I can help you out," Anson said, "but it hurts to give it to Slade."

They went on in silence to the cabin. Presently Jack said:

"I wonder what Iris has got up her sleeve? What could she hope to do with Slade?"

"I don't know. There was a moment back there when she would have killed him, if she'd been let. But that's gone by."

"She would do murder for Nona. No sisters, even twins, ever loved each other like those two. They grew up together. I think that at one time Iris would have married me if she hadn't discovered that Nona had picked me for her own. And look at me!" He threw out his hands with a gesture of despair.

"Well," said Anson, "if this cures you, then what's left shouldn't be so bad. There's only one caterpillar in your core, Jack. Properly cauterized, you might be a man."

"Thanks, old chap. Oh, well, it's got to be faced. If ever I can get Nona back, I'll come clean with her."

"Wait until she's fairly sure the cure is complete," Anson advised.

They talked a little longer, then Jack began to gather up his effects and stuff them into his kit bag. He was closing this when there came a step outside. Anson looked through the window and saw Danny. The chauffeur's face was a mass of puckers.

"What's up, Danny?" Anson called. "Come in."

Danny entered the shack. He seemed to be embarrassed, and his goggle eyes avoided the two men.

"Well, what is it?" Anson asked sharply. "Why leave Miss Lloyd alone with that brute."

"Her orders, sir," Danny muttered.

"Why?" Anson demanded, and rose

from the bench on which he had been sitting. "Just what were her orders?"

"To come here and tell you two gentlemen that she has hopes of gettin' what she wants from Slade, but that it will all be spoiled if she is interrupted. Perhaps she is right—I dunno. Miss Lloyd has a way with her. If anybody could put a crimp in him, 'tis she. He seemed to be listenin' to reason when I left."

For some reason a chill struck through Anson. He moved toward the door. "I'd better look into this, Jack. You wait here."

"Mr. Johns," Danny's voice cracked.

"Well?"

"If go you must, then do not let her see you. Perhaps I should have done like she ordered me, maybe. If a guy could guess what is under that lady's bob. Speakin' general, her and me have the same idea—only she has it more."

"What are you trying to say?" Jack asked sharply.

"Onced I knew a guy who was that hard a dog would break his teeth on him," Danny said, "but he would near faint at a clap of thunder. In a storm that might not be so hard as most in late August, he would be under the mattress, near smothered. I knew another big bum that could not climb a porch, for gettin' dizzy. He was a gun fighter, and good, but a kid cop nabbed him on a window sill not thirty feet above the ground, him sweatin' with fright. He could not stand to sit on the top of a bus on the outside seat."

"What's that got to do with Miss Lloyd?" Anson asked, pausing at the door.

"There was a tough kid I grew up with, and him with no scare at all except of horses," Danny went on, as if to himself. "We other kids used to drag him into a stable, for fun. Then one would fetch a horse a wallop over the stern with a broom handle, and when he stomped and snorted and rattled his chain, Micky would howl. And him the toughest in our gang."

"All of which says what?" Jack demanded impatiently.

"This here Slade, or Dales, is casehardened," Danny said. "Before he fell for soft and dirty graft like this here, he was holdup and bank robber out in Chi, where a yegg must be good to make his name. The last man you would pick for any yallow streak at all. But Miss Lloyd put her finger on it, instant."

"What?" Anson demanded.

"Water, sir. He dreads it like the devil might, were it blessed."

"What the devil are you driving at?" Jack demanded.

"Now, Mr. Williams, I'm that uncertain if we ought to interfere some or let nature take her course. This lady knows her book, or I'm a chink, and she gives me orders I promise to obey strict; and here I'm breakin' 'em first throw, and we not easy rattled. But there's somethin' about her I don't get, complete, and it has me guessin' plenty." He turned his goggle eyes on Anson and crinkled his forehead into a maze of twisted lines. "Now what do you think, Mr. Johns? Should we sit tight like she wants, and hope for the best? What do you think, sir?"

"I think she's thrown a scare into you, Danny. Stay here, both of you. I'll do a scout."

He made for the door. As he reached the threshold Danny called after him:

"They are at the east end of the beach, sir—close in under the ledge. You could give them the once-over from the edge of the rocks and not be seen." He ended in a sort of wail: "Now I wish I knew were I doin' the right thing or makin' a flop of the show. But who can say how far that young lady may go? There is somethin' phony about her quiet way."

Anson, puzzled and a bit disgusted at these maunderings, went out. Danny,

he reflected, had a gang leader's quickness of wit and alertness of mind, but like most one-time malefactors of back-alley origin he would be confused by an outcrop of lawlessness in society's elect. Iris, Anson felt convinced, was up to some high-handed treatment of Slade, a third degree of sorts in which Danny had at first assisted. Observing him then to weaken, Iris had sent him to the shack with orders to keep Jack and himself there, on some pretext or other.

As he hurried along toward the east end of the crescent beach, Anson thought of the fatal look in Iris' brooding eyes as they had rested on Slade. Precisely thus, Anson reflected, must her ancestor, "the hangin' jedge," have contemplated many a trembling prisoner at the bar on whom his mind had already passed death sentence. But it is one thing to sentence a man to death and another to execute him personally, especially when the whole court happens to be a young lady of q rality. Anson could not believe that Iris would step so far down from her dignity as to offer physical violence to Slade, a handcuffed prisoner. Not in cold blood.

Nearly above the spot at the end of the beach described by Danny, Anson paused to listen. He looked back and saw something flit behind a big rock that reared itself like a Brittany menhir two hundred yards away. The color of this prowler, navy blue, betrayed him as Danny, for Jack wore a sport suit of tweed, very light in shade. Once again had Danny, the resourceful, been tormented into disobedience of orders by his vague doubts and fears. But then, Anson had reflected, Danny was not actually under any orders from Iris or himself.

He beckoned. Danny slipped out from behind the rock and approached with a hang-dog air. Anson ignored it. He was by this time near enough to the edge of the low cliff wall to have heard voices at its foot, and it seemed now to him that a sort of muttering not of the wash against the rocks reached his ears. He stole closer. Danny followed at his heels, slinking like a poacher.

Almost to the brink of the ragged natural sea wall with which the island was girt, Anson was brought up standing by a wild yell that froze him to the core. No special sense of his had ever recorded such a concentration of human anguish, whether of physical or mental torment, or both. It arrested for a moment the action of his heart. What made it even worse was that this fearful cry, beginning as a bellow then mounting to a shriek was suddenly syncopated, smothered with the abruptness of one in torment throttled in full outcry. A second later it burst out again, but with a different note that suggested a gush of water in the whistle of a steamship.

Anson plunged forward to the edge of the steep low cliffs and looked down. The spectacle on which his eyes rested was so amazing that for the moment he could only stare aghast. Danny, who had crept up behind him reached out and pressed Anson's elbow, as if admonishing silence for the moment.

At this extremity of the long, sickle-shaped beach it terminated abruptly in a mass of broken rock that jutted out for about a hundred yards until gradually submerged. Against a detached boulder close into this formation stood Slade, chest-deep in the water, which, though calm on this side of the island, caught right here a backwash of the long swell from the seaward side. This swept round the eastern end to swing in long, low undulations not over a foot or two in height that broke rhythmically on the beach and gurgled among the weed-covered rocks. Each of these swelling wavelets passed in turn completely over the head of Slade who evidently was bound Prometheuslike against the detached boulder. But that was only a part of the picture. Seated on a rock just clear of the wash, was Iris.

Fairly petrified at this outrageous picture, Anson understood immediately the reason for it. Here was Slade, his wrists handcuffed behind him, lashed to this rock by a piece of rope from the speed craft, undergoing the sort of torture to which in early days the Indians of that coast subjected their tribal enemies, to a fatal issue. The Passamaquoddies, Anson remembered, were wont to drive a stake in the flats at low tide, bind their victim to it, then contemplate his gradual submersion as the water rose. At this part of the coast there was, Anson knew, a rise of about twelve feet—two feet an hour for six hours.

He realized then that Iris had taken this means of extracting from Slade the information that she desired. She believed the man had brought with him the scurrilous evidence through which he had hoped to extract blackmail from Jack. She would reason that Slade had come prepared to make a cash transaction, hand over whatever he might have on receipt of its price. And now that Slade had proved stubborn up to the point where in the nature of the tide he could not hope to hold out much longer and live, Iris was prepared to wade out and cut him free on his revealing where he had placed the incriminating evidence.

Danny's indecision back there in the shack became immediately apparent to Anson, who found himself assailed by the same doubt. How far would Iris go? If Slade proved stubborn up to the moment when he could no longer hold his breath as the wave passed over him and catch it in between, would Iris liberate him? Or would she leave him to the fate that in her opinion he deserved? Peering from behind a cluster of sedge, Anson tried to study her face, but although she was a scant twenty yards away, it told him nothing. Leaning back, propped by one long round arm, she contemplated the sputtering Slade as inscrutably as might have done some Indian maiden whose lover had been slain by this captured enemy.

Anson backed away and turned to Danny. "You tied him to that rock?"

"I did, sir. Stripped to me undershirt and pants and drug him out, and him howlin'. Miss Lloyd helped, and it was she passed the lashin' under water while I held him. Now does she mean to leave him drown?"

"How do I know? He's near the end of his scope. This tide comes fast."

"Listen." Danny raised a warning hand.

The plashing of the waves was soft and low. Iris' voice was distinctly audible above its murmur. She said to Slade in a clear, steady voice. "I am going now. I don't care to watch the end of it."

She rose and stood, a superb figure against the dark background. The sheer beauty of her made Anson catch his breath. "You're a stubborn fool, Slade," she said. "Somebody should have sent you to the melting pot a long time ago."

A higher wave washed over Slade's coarse black hair. As it swayed on past he tried to shout, but achieved only a sort of strangled bleat. Then, before the next swell reached him he managed to articulate.

"Hold on!" he screamed. "You win. I'll give——"

Another wave quenched his voice. It broke out again, stranglingly. "In my car back in the woods—cushion of the back seat—— Help! Murder—drownin'. Oh, *gug—gug——*"

Iris splashed down into the water, bosom deep. Anson saw then that she had a clasp knife in one hand—Danny's, he assumed. Slade by this time was immersed to his armpits between waves. His head was wabbling on his shoulders. Plainly, the man's force was nearly spent. Even without the handcuffs he would not have proved a dan-

gerous antagonist. Anson marveled that a man with the constitutional dread of the water that Iris had discovered Slade to possess should have held out so long.

Iris reached him in a series of plunges that were partly swimming. Seizing him by one arm, she reached down with her knife and struggled to cut the rope reeved between Slade's wrists and around the boulder. A wave passed over the heads of them both, leaving Slade nearly asphyxiated. The next moment they were swept away from the rock. Slade, lifted by the swell, pitched forward and went under.

Iris grabbed him by the shoulder and started for the beach. As she lurched along, dragging the semiconscious Slade, Anson saw that she was smiling. Despite his horror at the whole performance, a surge of admiration swept through him. Also, he wondered if the world held anywhere another woman of such strong and radiant beauty.

Dragging Slade to the water's edge, Iris looked up and saw Anson and Danny at the top of the ledge.

"It's all right," she called. "I've got what I've wanted."

"He may be lying," Anson said. "Stalling for time."

"I don't think so. If he is, then so much the worse for him. We'll keep him here until we know." She leaned over Slade, who had sunk down a limp, water-logged heap. "If you're lying, then God have mercy on you, Slade."

"It's straight," Slade gasped. "You win, lady."

Iris drew herself up. Indifferent to her wet, scanty investiture of silk she said calmly to Danny. "Jump in the speed craft and go back to the house. Do you know where he left his car?"

"Yes, ma'am. It was run into the woods at the head of the lane."

"Then go there and rip open the cushion of the back seat. Bring whatever you find. If you see Mrs. Williams, tell her that you took Mr. Johns to an island to get some pictures, and that I came, too. Tell her anything you like. Only hurry."

"Yes, ma'am," Danny said, and started down the beach on a run.

Iris looked thoughtfully at Anson, who did not dare to look at her. "I suppose," she said slowly, "that you must think me a dreadful savage. Perhaps I am. But I'd do a lot more to save——"

Anson interrupted harshly:

"Your husband doesn't deserve it."

Iris smiled at him approvingly. She did not miss the quickness with which he had saved what might have been a fatal slip. She had been on the verge of saying, "to save Nona."

"Cheating husbands never do," she said. "We women are fools."

Anson, looking down at Slade, saw that the man was shaking violently. He reached down and took him by the shoulder. "Get up and come with me," he said.

CHAPTER V.

A LIFE PRESCRIPTION.

"YOU were all wrong about my feeling for Nona," Anson protested a week later to Iris, as they sat on the edge of the pines and watched the low sun gilding the rims of the distant hills, the valleys plunged in purple shadows. "I found in her what seemed to be the completion of an ideal—the type of woman that a man's imagination has built up from boyhood as his sometime mate. But when she fell in love with Jack, it faded out."

"The ideal?" Iris asked.

"No—her own depiction of it. I may have reasoned unconsciously that a woman who fell in love with the Jack type could never possibly be the sort of mate for me. Where Jack exasperated her beyond endurance, I would probably have bored her. That might have been worse."

"More hopeless to cure, perhaps," Iris admitted.

"Then you came along," Anson said, "and presented the same ideal, but a good deal more so. Strong food for the contemplation of the peaceful student."

"Completely indigestible, I'd say." Iris laughed. "Once in a great while, Anson, you may run onto a person who does not seem to have moved forward with the civilization of the few last centuries—— A backward child of grace."

"Haven't we all got some of that?"

"Perhaps. Usually when it's in excess, it takes the left-hand path, though —shapes a Slade, before he sank to blackmail—when he was pure wolf instead of a sneaking, sheep-killing dog. The honest savage, like myself, has a racial antipathy for such. My grandfather had it."

"Tell me something, Iris," Anson said. "If he had proven stubborn to the end, would you have let him drown?"

Iris gave her low, short laugh. "That is something that you shall never know."

"Did you feel no spark of pity for him?" Anson persisted.

She looked surprised. "Why, yes, of course. A lot. But what had that to do with it? I mean, how could pity for such a beast affect my love for Nona—or the determination to keep her life from being ruined?"

"Your stark logic," Anson said, "is like your stark beauty—overwhelming to a drab mind clogged with racial habit of thought and a timid vision that does not try to penetrate the drapings of convention."

"Your drab mind and timid vision did not recoil at a pistol pointed at your heart," Iris said.

"My own was on Slade, and he struck me as anything but a suicide. That stalemate was as safe as chess. Every gunman knows that he cannot kill a determined person dead enough to keep him from pulling the trigger."

Iris looked at him indulgently. "It's easy to see why your friends like to guy you about your nature stuff, Anson —your modesty simplex. There's nothing complex at all about you."

"Well, I don't have to worry about being shown up for a fraud."

"No," Iris agreed, and added slowly; "nor to be always on your guard to keep your savage intolerance of crooks and grafters from blazing out."

Anson looked at her thoughtfully. "Your disguise is masterly, Iris. Even before I met you, looking at your portrait, I thought I had never seen so lovely and serene a face—as if no earthly disorder could mar your peace. You look that way even when passing sentence."

"It's an inheritance, Anson. I'm the female avatar of 'the hangin' jedge.' He confined his intolerance to criminals, but mine extends to selfish, unscrupulous people of every class. I'm getting worse. Something has got to be done about it, by somebody."

"I believe you," Anson said. "Intolerance is worse than the cause of it. A sort of bigoted snobbery. There's no offense that hasn't its plea. I'm at the other extreme—too tolerant, and that might be worse."

Iris smiled. "Nona told me that you wouldn't kill the skunks, but offered to catch them alive in a box trap and deport them. Yes, that's tolerance to the *nth* degree."

"And you," Anson said, "would have killed a human skunk without a pin prick of remorse. Yes, I really think you need a cure."

"What sort?" Iris asked.

"A leavening of mercy; close association with a person of opposite nature—for a very long time."

"How long a time?"

"The rest of your life," Anson said.

"You see, Iris, the hereditary impulse to remove malefactors is so strong in you that the counteragent must be constant. You should never be out of contact with it."

Iris slowly turned her lovely face to him. It was a little too serene, its demure provocativeness too disturbing. The clear vision of Anson, trained to nature study, detected instantly the presence of art. A flame went through him.

Iris asked in her slow, soft voice: "Isn't that rather like being ordered by your doctor to wear a brace for the rest of your life—something to keep your spine from curving?"

"Perhaps. What if it is?" Anson was a little breathless. "There is nothing the matter with your spine, Iris, or anything at all in the beautiful body you've been given. But nothing matches less than a sweet, gracious body and an inexorable heart, even if that is directed against one single thing—crime. The association cannot last."

"What do you mean, Anson?"

"Sooner or later the heart quality will dominate. There will be a process of hardening, and it will certainly manifest itself."

The girl looked alarmed. "Physically?"

"Of course. The reverse of Pygmalion's Galatea. The ardor of the sculptor turned his statue into warm, pulsating flesh. If you indulge your merciless streak it will grow and spread and in time turn you into stone."

Iris looked scared. "Gosh, Anson! I believe you're right. What can I do?"

"I've just told you."

"Well, be more explicit. Specify the treatment."

"Employ a solvent—some reagent to dissolve and absorb that little hardened focus before it——"

"Oh, talk everyday American," Iris cried impatiently. "You sound like the *Herr Doktor* of a Berlin *klinik*."

"Well, then, to spell it out for you, marry me."

"There!" Iris cried joyously. "At last I've managed to drag it out of you, after nearly a week's hard work. Of course I'll marry you, you pedantic old darling; and something tells me that it's going to be a cure."

Nona, glancing at the two radiant faces an hour later, rose quickly from her husband's side and kissed them both. She was no longer worried about Jack; but she had been very anxious about her cousin for a long time past, and now that care was entirely removed.

Did you ever hear of a constable resigning his job in order to aid the defense of the prisoner he has brought in? That is what happens in "Wild Poison," Clay Perry's novel which will open next week's issue. It is a story of the timber woods, and there is a most unusual girl in it who is linked with the mystery of an eerie, wailing wind—the windigo, *feared by red and white men both.*

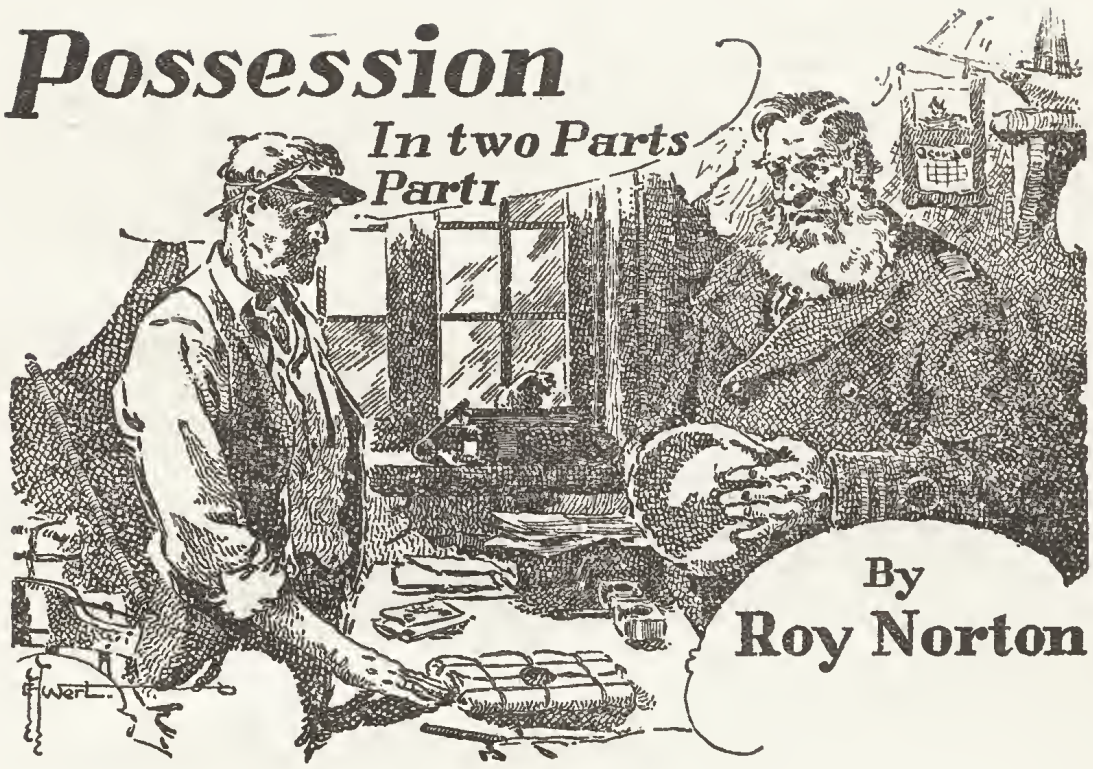
A TWENTIETH-CENTURY PUZZLE

MAYBE some discerning historian a thousand years hence, looking back upon the twentieth century, will be able to explain why it was the custom of the benighted people of the time to assume that the motorist who took them for an all-day drive automatically became their host and must pay for everything they ate and drank.

Possession

In two Parts

Part I



By
Roy Norton

Author of "The Best Traditions of the Sea," Etc.

When Captain Drake, skipper of the tramp steamer *Malabart*, agreed to deliver that mysterious letter, he knew, from the liberal sum paid him by Brooks & Son, shipping agents, that it was a dangerous task.

"YOU seem, Captain Drake, to have in some way possessed yourself of most of the loose trade down that part of the East African coast," Brooks, the shipping agent remarked, eying with something like mild curiosity the huge, weather-beaten mariner who sat in the grimy little office of Brooks & Son.

"Not exactly, sir," Drake replied, with a slight sniff at such a sweeping and unprecise statement. "I have succeeded in building up a fair trade in ports that the big fellows haven't considered worth going after. Rotten ports. Dangerous for any ship that doesn't know 'em to go into. Places where ships bigger than my *Malabart* couldn't go. Channels and bottoms that shift with every monsoon and aren't of enough importance for surveys to keep the charts up to date. A risky trade, picked up piecemeal, that I dare say none but a man fixed as I am could find any profit in."

His eyes were fixed absently on the rows of cobwebbed files covering long-past transactions when the grandfather of the present Brooks had founded his firm; but his mind was cunningly and cautiously guarding his tongue. It was not for him to admit that he had built up this trade almost secretly; that he had made it unprofitable for any rival; and that the last ship which had tried to compete with him, a ship called the *Woltendam* of the detested Carleson & Methens line and come back empty and reported that in all those obscure ports there was not enough business to pay for venturing. It was not the Opportunist's way to admit that by adroit

management, fair regularity in service, and invariably "making good," he had built the traffic up to a point where it was like a little gold mine. Not a large one, to be sure, but one that in the days of big combinations with big organizations and a well-worked globe was more than satisfactory to a man such as he, who owned his own ship, conducted his own negotiations and took pride in his independence now that the small independent cargo tramps were being driven off the seas. He wondered if this man Brooks had something ulterior in his mind.

"You go into Berang, sometimes, I think you said?" the agent asked.

"Yes, sir, sometimes. Not often. Very bad place to get in and out of since——" He stopped, remembering that the particular danger of the main entrance was due to the foundering of a hulk, bottling it, that a bulletin had warned mariners to keep clear of the port, and that but for him that same ship *Woltendam* would have piled her bones atop to make it still more unpassable.

"But it can be got into, can't it?" Brooks insisted.

"Yes," Drake admitted, reluctantly. "For those who know how."

"Are you going in there this voyage?"

"I think not," he said. And he added: "Never much of anything to go in there for. But if you've got any cargo bound for Berang——"

"We haven't. Otherwise I should have told you when giving you the stuff for those other E. A. ports. But—I might make it worth your while to run in there. Ummh!—Would fifty pounds be any object?"

It would. A decided object. Drake, an opportunist, was inwardly glad that he had not admitted that on this trip he most certainly would make Berang, in the confident expectation of picking up more cargo hungering for transport than from almost any other port in his territory.

"It's—sort of—out of my way," he said, shaking a doubtful head and feeling his blocky chin with his finger tips as if weighing possibilities. "I have to figure close on expenses all the time. Fuel. Crew. Nothing cheap down that way and——" He stopped, but was listening for what might come further.

"See here, captain, this is a confidential matter. It's something that was intrusted to our firm to handle and—honestly, I don't know what's back of it! But I do know this: I was told to make the best arrangements I could and—well, there's no sense in beating the devil around a bush—I was told to go as high as a hundred and fifty pounds if necessary. Mind you, no cargo—nothing to do but this—deliver a letter. Guarantee to deliver it, secretly, personally, into the hands of the man to whom it is addressed."

Drake sat up with a start of surprise and curiosity.

"Must be something mighty important if they're willing to pay that much," he said.

"Of course it must be! But, as I told you, I haven't an idea in the world what it is or what it's about. All I know is that it's something too important to trust to the rather—shall we say casual—mail service down that way. It can be nothing illegal, because it was given me by one of the most reputable firms of solicitors in Plymouth. For some reason that I know nothing of, they impressed on me that it must be given to no one but a man who would make the delivery if he agreed to. Needless to say—well, our firm has done business with you for nearly twenty years off and on, and—I vouched for you being the man—in fact, the only one I could think of whom they could depend upon. Now do you want it?"

"But if it's so important, why don't they send one of their own men?"

"Because they don't wish to attract attention by the use of a total stranger. It's to a man named Brenholt."

Drake involuntarily leaned forward in his chair, surprise on his face.

"I surmise you know him," Brooks said.

And Drake, recovering, leaned back and contented himself with:

"Yes, I think I have met him. And —of course, I'll take it on. I'll see that he gets it. Will give it to him from my own hands. It seems a simple enough matter."

Brooks arose, went to his safe and produced a bulky waterproof envelope. From this he took another of linen, very carefully sealed and corded through, which he inspected before handing to Drake.

"I'm instructed," he said, "to call attention that the seals are intact, to take your receipt for it in that condition. I'll give you a check. You are to return me a receipt from—what's this his full name is?—oh, yes, Herr Professor Brenholt."

"They don't seem to be taking any chances with it," Drake remarked, as he replaced the envelope in its waterproof covering, and put it into his pocket.

"It is I who am taking whatever chance there is," the agent said with a quiet smile. "As a matter of fact, I was to try to arrange payment on return of this man's receipt; but, knowing you as I do, and having got your word that you'll deliver it, I'm going to clear the whole matter up now."

"That's complimentary," the captain said. And then, considering the peculiarities of the proceeding, he asked: "But suppose this man is no longer there? Suppose he has gone away—say into the interior? You can't expect me to carry on with a stern chase to give it into his hands? This matter didn't seem so important until I think it over. In fact, I'd rather not accept the check until I return you the receipt."

"That's all right, captain. Not much risk, I take it, of his having moved from quarters he has occupied ever since the war. Indeed, I understood, somehow, that he has been waiting for and expecting this communication for some time. No, you can't of course leave your ship and chase him all over Africa. Not to be expected. If he's not in Berang you can return the letter and the check to me when you come back. I dare say it'll be the easiest hundred and fifty quid you've turned in many a day."

Once outside the office Drake stood a moment meditating over that extraordinary transaction. One hundred and fifty pounds merely for delivering a letter! Not illegal. Couldn't send a special messenger because—— What was it he knew of this man Brenholt down there, and where did he meet him? He thumped his forehead with his hard knuckles in vexation because he had nothing but vague, inconsequential memories of a name that had impressed him, but that, lacking any further interest, had therefore been dismissed.

But a check for one hundred and fifty pounds, seven hundred and fifty dollars, so easily come by, was a windfall. Yet the letter felt heavy in his pocket, and he paused there in the hallway to transfer it to the inside pocket of his waistcoat, and then, finding a safety pin he always carried for such occasions, he painstakingly made it fast.

All through the remainder of that afternoon, while he was making his clearance formalities, it oppressed him with a sense of its importance. He found himself now and then unconsciously feeling to make certain that it was still secure. His hand was on it when he climbed aboard his ship that

evening. After giving his chief officer, Catlin, sailing orders, he went to his cabin, closed the door behind him and then, as if apprehensive, pulled the shades over the window before unlocking his diminutive safe and depositing the letter therein.

"Can't understand why that damned thing has got on my nerves," he thought, irritated by his own precautions, as he locked it into an inner compartment of the safe. And then, after he had actually shut the outer door, he reopened it and the compartment, to examine again the linen envelope and make certain that the seals were intact and the binding cord sound. "I might have been too careless up there in Brooks' office," he told himself. "Just as well to be certain that she's all shipshape and Bristol fashion. And she is!"

No happier ship than the *Malabart* worked any sea, or anywhere on salt water. Her crew was solid, the result of long and careful selection; there was not a man in her company who did not know the characteristics of his fellows; there wasn't a man aboard who didn't esteem himself a part of her; there hadn't been a change in her personnel for more than two years. Even the "boy apprentice" had achieved the age of twenty years and hung on because the *Malabart* had become part of him, and was his home.

And yet as she broke her way through the encircling seas down toward "The Gib," and thence swam to the Suez and through its dreary length, Drake at intervals was troubled with that thing in his safe—that mere envelope that he had pledged himself to deliver. And with growing frequence he shut himself into his cabin to reassure himself of its safety. It was always there when he opened his safe—always resting quietly on top of his bank books, some prized keepsakes and the little bag of international gold that had accumulated because it was not of individual unit worth exchange.

At Port Said he had a momentary panic because there had been a lot of shore scum wandering about while Catlin and Giles had taken an hour ashore. At Tewfik, the other end of the canal, he had, after visiting a friend, hastened his return to make certain that it was still there. Whenever he left his ship for even a short time, his first thought when he returned was of that envelope and its portentous seals. Two or three times he dreamed it had been stolen and that he made endless and fatiguing pursuits of dangerous thieves for its recovery. Meeting obstacles. Running amuck. Overpowered, baffled, defeated while still endeavoring to fulfill his obligation to deliver it.

So obsessed was he with this obligation that he decided to confide in Catlin, his chief mate and his only intimate friend—the man he regarded almost as a son, and, secretly, his sole legal heir. He found himself expatiating upon the sacredness of trust, of obligations, of the importance of delivering that missive to Brenholt, and he ended with his shore form of address which Catlin knew was unusual and rare in his code of ship's discipline:

"Bill, if anything happens to me, you get that damn letter into Brenholt's hand yourself, get his receipt, and take it back to Brooks & Son in Plymouth."

"But—but what the hell's got into it, skipper?" Catlin, himself reverting to shore intimacy, demanded. "As far as I can see it's just a letter you got to give to this man Brenholt in Berang. Not the first letter you've ever carried and turned over. Most of 'em look alike, don't they? Only thing I can understand about it is that it's grown mighty important because they paid you such a fool lot of money to take care of it."

Captain Eli, enclouded with smoke

in the privacy of his cabin, considered this for a while before answering, and then admitted:

"Maybe that's all there is to it, Bill, but—it's got me. You see, I gave my word and—got to make good. No matter what happens. They paid me that price because they trusted me. Believed in me! When any man does that, Bill—— Anyhow, I've told you about it, and I can depend on you the same as Brooks depended on me. So don't forget it."

Mr. Catlin retired from the interview with a worried expression, and once outside made his way to the end of the bridge, looked out over the languid wash of waters separating the ship from Somaliland and muttered:

"Has the Old Man gone balmy, or has he got a hunch that he's due to kick off!" And then, to Mr. Catlin's credit, he too became alarmed, and asked himself: "What would I, yes, any of us do—if that happened? And there's them that calls him the 'Old Hyena' and us as sometimes cusses him, but—there ain't none of us that don't love him and who wouldn't give his life for him and—— Good Lord! He's got me balmy about that letter, too!"

And then he trudged off to his own affairs, but couldn't forget that he too had become a partner in responsibility. Now and then, thereafter, he seriously considered the precaution of sharing the responsibility with Giles, the second mate, as if a succession of responsibilities and trusts had been established to burden the whole ship with its discharge until it came to the galley boy after the demise of all sailors, the engine-room staff from Forbes down to the latest stoker, and finally through stewards and cooks to the least important member of the ship's company. The letter had bewitched him as it had Drake, he finally and morosely decided.

And all the time the *Malabart* went her way southward, sweltering by days, panting by nights, as the variation of stars came with her equatorial approach. To Catlin a malign influence seemed to emanate from the captain's safe and spread a blight. He felt himself becoming irritable.

But in time the *Malabart* made her landfall and in the torrid stillness of the forenoon worked her tedious and risk-ridden way, twisting and turning, crawling, with the lead constantly swinging and splashing, into the security of Berang harbor, and ten fathoms of water for anchorage. The flag of Portugal, bravely new and exceptionally large, fluttered above her in a slight offshore breeze that was tinged with the smell of rotting papyrus from the swamps behind the town. Dhows with matting sails, whose crews of all colors and degrees of mongrel ancestry seemed to have nothing better to do than vent their curiosity, swarmed about her. A four-oared boat came alongside with a man in uniform in the stern.

"It's that fat-witted, blue-nosed governor, sir," Catlin said.

And Drake replied:

"Thought it looked like him. The swine! Lower away the side ladder. Mustn't scratch that guy's dignity."

As proof of his own diplomacy Drake slipped to his cabin and shortly emerged in his best uniform and best cap, and was at the head of the ladder to welcome the official as if the latter were an old and esteemed friend. They shook hands formally and the governor pompously followed Captain Eli to the main saloon. Instantly his public manner departed and he slapped Drake on the back, a familiarity to which the latter submitted with an inward wriggle of disgust.

"Ah, my very dear friend. Your so great hospitality is always the same!" the governor declared, licking his thick, red lips in anticipation of

the champagne that he knew would soon be forthcoming. Perhaps also for other wine, a case or two of which always seemed to find its way to the solid old house he referred to as his "residency" whenever the *Malabart* entered this out-of-the-way port. The formula was always the same when the *Malabart* came to Berang. There was never any trouble with her papers. She was always given instant practique. In that place where law seemed made for lawlessness, any other ship entering would have found herself harassed by hundreds of petty annoyances, foolish obstacles, labor troubles, detentions. Even Drake, who sometimes felt he owned it and its commerce as by private concession, occasionally wondered what would happen if he failed to bring certain presents to this pompous, besotted, malarial-ridden official. The governor sat opposite Drake with his uniform thrown open, his waistcoat unbuttoned, the top buttons of his trousers released to make room for a paunch that had outgrown a waistband; and at the moment he was unfastening cravat and collar as if in time he might even shed his gaudily striped shirt.

"Her excellency, the Signora Governess, is well?" Drake inquired, and receiving an assurance that she was, he further asked, as always before he had asked: "Would it be demanding too great an honor if I called upon you and the lady this evening?"

And as usual the governor tried to appear thoughtful like one considering numerous social engagements in this town where there was nothing social, and as usual responded:

"No—I think we are unoccupied this evening. But—ah! You must dine with us. That's it. Dine with us. We dine at eight o'clock, punctually. My wife will be glad to greet so good a friend in the residency."

Doubtless he knew that the captain would bring a present. There was that amazing tall clock with its extraordinary chimes that natives came to hear from over the adobe wall. The wonderful set of gilt, red-plush furniture that had appeared as another present. As he finished his bottle of wine and arose, he secretly speculated on what it might be this time, and was hopeful. Not that these were bribes! He, a governor, could not, of course, be bribed. Not at all. Drake's mind was still obsessed with that letter; but he could not have told why, each time he thought of it, and questions as to Professor Brenholt came to his tongue, something, perhaps an habitual caution, restrained him.

Catlin had the hatches of the main hold off and steam was oozing from the winch engine before the governor took to his boat. Instantly thereafter black stevedores swarmed to the deck, the winch started, the first of the big dhows in waiting drew alongside with its shouting crew, and the *Malabart* began discharging cargo consigned to one of the local trading companies. Shortly afterward Captain Eli, with uniform discarded for tropical whites and wearing an ancient sun helmet, thrusting a bundle of papers into his pocket, called for the dinghy and went ashore to visit his consignees.

"This hole never changes!" he muttered, as he stood at the foot of the main street of Berang and stared at the mango trees throwing their hot shadows over the fronts of scattered houses and shops of mud and plaster painted a sickly pink, and saw a flock of goats being driven along the road, their twinkling heels stirring up the gray-pink dust of the coral sand. He turned into a side street and as he entered a huge, galvanized-iron structure fronted by an ancient adobe house converted into offices, he smiled for the first time that day with frank confidence. He was going to meet one whom he esteemed as the sole honest

man in Berang, old Luigi Gargiuolo the trader, who of an Italian father and an English mother had been born in Africa, and prospered meagerly despite the knavery of dishonest rivals.

Drake took off his helmet as he stepped beneath the porch, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and entered the cool darkness of the place. And then, with that strange click as of a mental shutter opened by suggestion, he recalled what he knew of Brenholt. It was here in Luigi's storeroom—a powerfully built, blond man with a massive head and abstracted gray eyes; forty—yes—must have been about forty years old. "Herr Professor," Luigi had called him when making an introduction; and somehow Drake had gathered that there was friendship, or at least respect, uniting the two. Um-m-mh! Must have been eighteen months ago. Said but a few words that day. Never thought of the man since. Well, that simplified matters. Luigi would know where he could be found.

And—there was Luigi himself, fat, bald-headed, smiling, and coming forward.

There were many business matters to discuss and business was satisfactory. Especially so from Drake's viewpoint, and he prided himself on commercial acumen. Particularly was he gratified when Luigi commented:

"Berang really owes you much, captain. The assurance to the back-country planters that they can depend upon a regular transport for their products seems to have stimulated production. Men talk of it. You will be surprised at the cargo waiting for you—for instance, three hundred tons of copra from one source where a year ago you had but fifty. And cloves—and ground nuts, I don't know how many hundreds of bags this time, what with the market good and all the last lots profitable. I sometimes wonder if you appreciate that you and your *Malabart* are really creating a field that should become peculiarly your own. You will find our people, especially the back-country planters, not ungrateful."

"Perhaps," Drake said. "Perhaps—until the big fellows begin to learn that I am getting decent cargoes, enter in, cut the rates below Mozambique standards, and then——"

"Not all men are disloyal, surely," the fine old man objected. "There are still those who cherish friendships, fair dealing, integrity. I, for instance, am not rich, but have survived many competitors. There are still those in Portuguese East Africa who are loyal to their friends, and fulfill obligations."

Drake sipped the cup of coffee that had been served by an Arab in Luigi's private office, an invariable ceremony after the conclusion of business details, and looked pensively at a Portuguese official trade license framed on the wall behind the trader's head. A whorl of insects gyrating in the line of vision made it appear to quiver.

"By the way," he said, as if it were a matter of idle recollection, "I met a friend of yours in here one time who interested me. I wonder whatever became of him. Let's see—Brenholt, Professor Brenholt—wasn't that the name?"

Happening to lower his eyes to a direct gaze while voicing his question, he saw the swift, sharp look of concern on the trader's placid face; observed that his plump hands resting upon the table suddenly contracted although the fingers spread and raised.

"Ah-h-h!" It was almost like a suppressed sigh. And then almost in alarm, or at least imbued with the need of absolute privacy, Gargiuolo rose, walked to the office door, stared out and shut the door despite the stagnant, immovable, fixed atmosphere of his den. To Drake it seemed that he had made certain that none of his clerks had

overheard that question—as if it were the utterance of a name forbidden—taboo in those precincts.

The trader returned to his desk, leaned his elbows over it, and in a subdued voice—insurance against listeners—muttered:

"The Herr Professor Brenholt? Captain, as friend to friend, may I inquire why you ask of him? Is it accident, or is it because—— Tell me why you ask?"

The mysterious manner, surreptitious, secret, hushed, in that clove and copra-scented cuddy-hole, warned Drake that he had been right in avoiding mention of that common Germanic name when conversing with the governor, Souza.

"Good Lord!" he said. "Can't one ask about a man in this place without—— Tell me—what's wrong with Brenholt? Is he still here?"

"Unfortunately for him, and for the sympathies of me, his friend, he still is—in prison! By order of Souza, our governor! And in Berang those who are friends of men whom his excellency imprisons are—well—in danger. You don't know Berang. Listen! You have met Souza. Perhaps in a way you esteem him. A leopard when friendly pats one with velvet pads; but to its prey its claws are sharp, and rip and tear regardless of blood and wounds. Yusuf, the governor's dragoman, or guard, does the murder work with his knife. The leopard is cunning. Has objects. The object may be sheer cruelty or food. Food with a human leopard usually is hope of gain. Brenholt is in prison—has been for more than a year. Souza is the leopard who put him there and plays with him, the victim, in hope of gain."

The trader had lowered his voice until it was barely audible to Drake, but such sincerity, such warning, such actual fear were conveyed by it that the latter found himself in turn whispering across that ink-stained, littered, and worn desk:

"But I don't understand? What in hell can a man like Governor Souza hope to gain by jailing a poor devil of a German professor who, as far as I can recall him—and I do recall him—was not well dressed—even shabby, I think. Did he have money for—say fines, or ransom?"

"Not a dollar. Not a single Portuguese *reis*. Nothing. He had nothing save what I gave him. No food save what I let him have from my store. And yet—in that brain of his facts had been accumulated that might mean riches greater than the Rand—perhaps diamonds to make the famous Kimberly a secondary heap of clay. Nobody knows. He is purely a scientist, an avid gleaner of knowledge, and, as you may or may not know, was once considered one of Germany's most capable, if not most eminent, geologists and mineralogists."

"But I still can't understand what a man like that knows that is cause for his imprisonment, or how another may hope to cash in something from what he——"

"Ah! Wait. I will explain—and I tell you this! Sometimes it seems to me that the very centipedes and scorpions of Berang have ears, can carry messages, and are spies. That was why I shut the door—why I now mutter; for it would be fatal to me—ruinous, perhaps cost me my life as well as possessions—if it were ever known that I secretly sympathize with that unfortunate man and have told you of his plight. You understand?"

"Not entirely; but no one can keep a tighter mouth than I. And I have certain reasons, I will now admit, of wanting to know what all this means. Luigi, I've got a letter to deliver into that man's hands. Gave my word I'd give it to him and no other, and—it must be important. I don't know

what's in it. It's sealed. But I got paid an absurd sum to undertake it."

"A letter! You can't deliver it! You mustn't! He couldn't hide it if you gave it to him—there in that foul jail. And it's a thousand chances to one that, whatever it contains, it would cost him his life. When a man is imprisoned by Souza's orders, all letters he receives, or all letters he writes, go to Souza. That's why Brenholt is kept in prison—in the hope that something that comes to him, or goes from him, will give the governor the information he wants. And even if you attempt to deliver that letter to Brenholt personally, and are caught, your life wouldn't be worth—that!" He snapped his fingers. "No matter how brave you are, Yusuf's knife would find you. Your body would be discovered the next day. Souza would be so sorry, would storm, pretend to investigate and—finish."

"I've taken a good many chances in my time where my life would have been worth even less if I had failed," Drake said dryly. He was so evidently unimpressed by the fear of death, or anything Souza or his tame murderer might do, that the trader shook his head doubtfully. "But I like to know why I'm taking the gamble." And his conclusion was an invitation to Luigi to proceed. He did so, after again slipping to his door to make certain that there were no eavesdroppers.

"Before the war Professor Brenholt was retained by—no one knows—but its been pretty generally understood, by the emperor personally. Was to make an exhaustive study of German East Africa's mineral, including diamond possibilities, and report confidentially. It is known that he made one such report, and it is known that the then emperor used the words: 'There are indications of deposits in our colony which will astound the world!' Brenholt worked alone, but with every possible means put entirely at his command. He is a conservative, painstaking man who wouldn't be likely to chase either rainbows, or follow mirages. He is a delver for facts—facts—facts! Nothing else would satisfy such a man, and he was still seeking them when the war broke out.

"He was captured away back of Kilimanjaro. Didn't even know there was a war. Didn't seem to care much if there was until he was brought down to the coast and interned. But he'd done this, due probably to the carelessness of his captors: succeeded in either concealing, or destroying—probably the former—all of his field notes and diaries. He had nothing save ordinary *safari* outfit when interned. Men were too busy at that time to make any search. The war with its exigencies was of greater importance than any mere scientific data, any field notes—anything. To the British officers conducting that campaign Brenholt was merely a harmless explorer, unknown, of no importance, and not worth any special attention.

"No great sensation was caused when he escaped, stowed away on a supply ship, was dragged out of his hiding place here in Berang and again interned. It made no difference, so insignificant was he regarded, whether he was held here or returned. So he was held here, and the war came to an end, and here he remained awaiting the turn of events. There were war settlements, war divisions of lost colonies and—German East Africa became Tanganjika, under British protection.

"Men, had no time to listen to Brenholt or demand his reports; he was without means and probably—having been solitary for years—without any influential friends. Moreover, such a man, purely a scientist, is impractical; never dreams that he can be of any importance to any one, and in such conditions as he found himself in would

have no more idea than a child what course to pursue.

"He made one great mistake as to his own significance—somehow Souza learned who and what he was. So when Brenholt wrote some probably indiscreet letters, they never got beyond Souza's hands. Souza courted him, had him to his home, endeavored to gain his confidences; and finally, after long pretense of sympathy and assistance, came boldly out and made him a proposition by which, if Brenholt would disclose the places where his important discoveries of metals or diamonds could be found, he could have liberty, money, and ten per cent of the eventual profits.

"Brenholt quietly declined, saying that without the consent of his previous employer—whoever that was—such disclosures would constitute a rotten betrayal of trust; that such a proposal was in itself an insult, and—I think they must have had some pretty heated words. The leopard's claws came out. I don't think Brenholt had the slightest tact, or fear. I doubt if he even realized his position—practically a man without a country—having no passports and no consular officials to whom he could appeal for protection—no money—no means of getting any—helpless in the hands of a man with the power which Souza has and is unscrupulous enough to use on the slightest selfish pretext.

"What he did to the stubborn, immovable Brenholt? Why"—his voice sank to a mere whisper of horror, and he wiped moisture from his forehead as he leaned across until his face was but a few inches from Drake's—"they, Souza and Yusuf, hanged him on meat hooks—through the palms of his hands! But he never opened his mouth, and hung there until he went unconscious! Almost a crucifixion, it was!" he paused, filled with the horror of it.

The mariner's mouth opened and his heavy eyebrows came down over his eyes.

"Hanged him on——" And then he broke into a low growl of epithets and anathema until the trader's hand convulsively closed over one of his hairy, clenched fists and the warning, "Sh-h-h-h-h! For Heaven's sake! Not so loud!" stilled him.

Luigi got up hurriedly, jerked the door open and passed into the outer office; and Drake sat there brooding over that monstrous injustice until he returned.

"Everything's all right," Luigi muttered. "Had to make certain. Now listen. Do you know if that envelope came from Hutchinson & Gray, Plymouth solicitors?"

It was Drake's turn to be startled, but he blurted:

"Yes. Brooks told me he got it from them."

The trader, who had listened as if the answer might be portentous, leaned back into his chair with a great sigh.

"I'm afraid—afraid it's too late to help poor Brenholt," he said, perplexedly. "I'm afraid I gave the poor devil cause for—false hopes. You see, he wanted—after the war settlement and when the British took control of German East Africa—to get permission from the British government to continue his researches, and, possibly, if he had really buried his notes and documents, to get back in there to recover them. That part I don't know. Uncommunicative sort of man. I didn't know how to go about it, and he didn't; but one day here in this office I happened to recall the name of that firm of solicitors who had once cleared up a small estate of my wife's in—satisfactorily. Trustworthy men. I suggested that he write to them, put the matter in their hands, and—yes, a few days later he borrowed three hundred pounds from me. I recall that I gave him a check on my English bank

—made it out to him—and that he indorsed it to Hutchinson & Gray and told me it was a retaining fee.

"I don't know what he wrote them. But he did write, sitting there where you are, and was starting out to mail the letter when I said: 'Here! If you put that into the post it may not catch the boat that's due to go out in an hour.' These postal officials here are—well—casual. I had to go aboard that boat myself, and I myself gave that letter to the captain, personally. So now it seems to me that must have been the sole letter he ever wrote from Berang that ever escaped Souza. No use now!"

"But why not?" Drake demanded.

"Why, suppose those solicitors did succeed in getting a permit to explore Tanganjika? What good could that possibly do a man who is in jail—in the clutches of Souza? I'll tell you frankly that I doubt if there's any way on earth to save Brenholt. Not even a government. Souza can't afford to let Brenholt get away from here alive. Scores of things might happen—the enlisting of some influence that would cause an investigation—— Don't you see that Souza's got in so deeply that it might cost him his official existence, perhaps his own liberty? In any event, things would go hard with him. The only thing that has kept him from having Brenholt quietly put out of the way was that his secret would die with him—thousand ways to get rid of him; several enemies of his excellency's have died from gastric trouble due to tainted food, and no one can be sure whether he did or didn't have them poisoned there in the jail, because these people aren't any too liberal or careful in the purchase and preparation of food for prisoners. A prisoner without friends or assistance merely dies by starvation. Anyhow, all the food Brenholt has had—little enough—I got smuggled in to him."

He stopped and stared sorrowfully into vacancy, meditating. Drake twisted in his seat impatiently, and then inquired:

"Well, what can you suggest? So far——"

"Of one thing I am certain, and that is that the letter mustn't be given to Brenholt in jail, because if it contains some things, he will be dead in twenty-four hours, and if it contains nothing of importance, it will be valueless to him there. No—it's dangerous in itself, that letter is. I would do anything within my power to help him, but I haven't been able to conceive any way at all. I had almost given up. But now that you are here—I wonder! I must try to think again! To-morrow when you come in——" He seemed sunk in apathy, and although his lips moved soundlessly did not finish the sentence aloud.

"Look, here," Drake said, and his voice had the quality of an angry growl. "Where is this prison? I could at least walk past and see what it looks like, couldn't I? It's natural for a sailor ashore to wander around. Of course, I shall do nothing to let any one think I have any particular interest in it."

After a moment's hesitancy and a few words of caution, the trader gave him directions, and, more or less boiling with inward indignation, Drake passed out into the long, sun-blistered avenue.

To be concluded next week.

The Crimson Rambler

Author of "The Reckoning,"

A wealthy man is murdered by an unseen hand as he begins a story that seems to link the warm and living

CHAPTER I.

MURDER DE LUXE.

I MET her in a traffic jam on the Avenue, a few blocks above the Waldorf, five thirty of a Saturday evening in early summer; that crepuscular period when the canyon is filled with a blue haze, and the tide of motor cars that has been flowing definitely northward since the tea hour is in full flood.

In the country it is a melancholy hour, but to me there is always something enchanting about this wedding of day and night in a great city; this fleeting period when the harshest outlines—even those in one's own life—are toned down, and familiar and ugly things take on the glamour of mystery and beauty. To me it is the hour of romance. Easy to imagine then that this huge caravansary, or that beehive of industry, gemmed with lights here and there, or even the New York Public Library, is a castle in Fairyland; that I am Prince Charming, that that vivid little manikin boarding a bus is Cinderella.

In short, I think it an hour when anything is liable to happen, an hour when surely we must meet that romance and adventure which we are certain is just around the corner, waiting for even the most drab and humble of us. It is an hour when I even manage to forget Charlotte.

And so, in a sense, I was quite prepared for this meeting. I mean, it seemed entirely natural and proper, in keeping with the mystic atmosphere in which nothing seemed what it really was, that I should find myself suddenly looking into a pair of eyes that I had

By
W.B.M.
Ferguson
In Five Parts-Part I

"*The Dollar God*," *Etc.*

sits in his car on crowded Fifth Avenue; and there present with the dark mystery of the Middle Ages.

not seen for—how many years? They had materialized opposite mine as though conjured from the air. Yet, after all, there was nothing mysterious about it; her car had simply slid alongside mine, and it is a commonplace that, sooner or later, one meets everybody on the Avenue.

Don't imagine I was in love with her, or anything like that. Perhaps during all the years that had passed I had never given her a thought, nor had she given me one, and yet here we were, cheek by jowl, two pieces of flotsam thrown up by the tide of chance, as once we had been before, staring at each other in the magic twilight through the open windows of our respective taxis.

"Good evening," I said, and doffed my hat. "And how is the little old thermometer keeping?"

"Why—why—Captain——" And here she floundered and stuck.

"Stone," I assisted, and realized suddenly that I had never forgotten her voice, a husky, musical contralto.

"Stone?" She looked faintly puzzled, doubtful. "Really? Are you sure?"

"You aren't very flattering, Miss Alston. You see I remember *your* name. Shirley Alston. I always approved of it. It's satisfying, and few names are."

"Thank you. But I don't remember ever confiding my Christian name to you, Captain Stone."

"That's all right; I guessed it, after seeing it on a letter. But I'm not a captain now."

"My mistake. No, of course, you must be a colonel by this time. Or is it a general?"

"Yes, cook general. The war is over, you know, and I had to go back to my pots and pans."

"But I thought you were in the regular army?"

"How very flattering! Are you sure you aren't getting me mixed up with Pershing?"

"I never had a memory for names," she confessed. "And think how long ago it was. Dear me! almost eight years, isn't it? Tempus certainly does fugit. All the same, I did know you at once. And you *were* in the regulars. You know you were. I've a head for figures, if not names, and I remember your unit."

Yes, almost eight years since I had seen these eyes under a white-starched cap, instead of this fashionable straw, for I had been nicked early in the show. A far cry from the Argonne to the Avenue, the base hospital "Over There" to a New York taxi.

I had known her neither long nor intimately, as conventional intimacy goes—knew nothing, indeed, but her name; yet here we were bandying words with all the camaraderie of those hectic far-off days when one asked no questions but just got acquainted. If the war was dead and buried, something of its spirit still lived. I suppose I had tried to make love to her, in a way—who didn't to his pretty nurse?—and she used to ram a clinical thermometer in my mouth when I became too much of a nuisance. Happy, carefree days, for all their background of blood and tears. I should never be twenty-something again, nor she eighteen. We had left all that behind.

"Why did you leave the army?" she asked. "I remember you were so keen on it."

"I don't admit I'm a West Pointer. You're only trying to be flattering now, pretending to remember something about me. But I didn't leave the army; it left me. Uncle Sam has no use for Charlotte."

"O-o-h, you're married now? Yes, of course. But even so——"

"No, I'm not married. This is Charlotte." And I pointed to my left eye. "Pure glass of the first water. You really can't see how beautiful it is in this light."

"Oh, I'm sorry." And we were so near each other that, with a little impulsive gesture, she stretched out a hand and laid it for a moment on the one I was resting on the window. "I'm truly sorry. It must be awful!"

I had found it so, and it was like her not to pretend, as so many others did, that it really made no difference. I hate attracting attention, and Charlotte evokes it everywhere. However superb an imitation, you can't move a fake eye like a fake limb. I catch people staring covertly at me, wondering why I've such a queer and sinister sort of look.

Perhaps it was that action of hers that decided me, that little gesture of understanding that said so much more than words. Traffic jams do not last forever, and in another moment we might be swept on our respective ways, never to meet again. Though she had not corrected me when I called her Miss Alston, she might now be married and have a brood of children. However——

I stepped out, tossed my driver a bill, entered the taxi opposite and took a seat at her side.

"How very characteristic," was her only comment.

"We are in funds to-night, Charlotte and I and one doesn't meet an old friend every night. Does a show and supper make any appeal? Say Pierre's, or the Ambassador."

"I'd just love to, but I can't. I must get home. Really."

"Not a husband, I hope?"

"I see you still need a thermometer,

captain—Mr. Stone. Yes, and discretion."

She laughed suddenly, and in the twilight I looked for and found the little dimple that appeared under her vivid nether lip. Strange, when one came to think of it, how much I should remember about her. But then I have an excellent memory for faces and details.

"Discretion, yes," she repeated. "Beware the strange woman of great cities. Doesn't your little book teach that elementary lesson? You really know nothing about me, yet here you are insisting upon identifying yourself with me. What if I've just committed a murder or something?"

"I'll take the chance. You really know nothing about me, either, if it comes to that. Anyway, I intend seeing you home."

"No, I don't think you will. You'll have a long ride. I'm going to the Grand Central."

"So am I. Upon my word, I am! I'm not just making it up."

"Well, but I'm going to Hillcrest-on-the-Hudson."

"And so am I."

"You're not! You can't be!"

"But I can, and I am. I've been in Hillcrest for nearly three weeks. It's a fact. How come I haven't seen you wandering about the purlieus? How come, I say?"

"Well, for one thing, I haven't been there even a week. For another, I don't really live in Hillcrest proper. But do you *really* live there? You aren't just fooling? I never did really know when you were serious."

"Hence my shattered life. But I do honestly and truly live there—the Harrington bungalow on the South Road. I was lured by the low rents and my love for the great open spaces, such as the cracks in the walls and roof. But where do you live?"

"On the Hill—Belvoir."

"Carlyle Scunthorpe's place? Oh, you're the new nurse companion?"

"And you're that 'unspeakable person!'"

"So you heard of the outrage I committed on old Viner? Well, well, if this isn't funny! We've been neighbors for nearly a week, and we meet like this."

It was here that a police officer and a plain-clothes man appeared, one at each door, and we heard about the murder.

Of course, had we not been so engrossed with each other, we should have heard of it before, just as we should have wondered what was holding up the line of cars all this time. News of that sort travels quickly and mysteriously, and, I dare say, it had been up and down the line several times without touching us. The Avenue was now black with people pouring in from the side streets, traffic both ways at a deadlock. Evidently the reserves had been called out from the nearest station, for I saw gold braid and brass buttons galore.

"What's the big parade about?" I asked.

The detective gave me an unpalatable look from a cold and disillusioned gray eye. I had seen more genial eyes in a shark—Charlotte was warm and human compared to his eyes.

Now this was no ordinary murder, such as occurs, say, in Chicago every week day and twice on Sunday. It belonged to the class, not mass-production type. Anybody can get murdered, but everybody can't be murdered in his own Rolls-Royce, a silk hat on his head, a dollar cigar in his mouth, and a flower in his lap. Nor does every victim own a place like Wrexham's. It takes the Perpendicular City to have a murder like this.

For the sake of clarity, I had better set down here facts we only heard later, for, certainly, the detective told

us no more than he could help. *Acta, non verba,* seemed to be his motto.

Wrexham's, of course, is *the* jeweler, and anybody who knows the Avenue knows the yards and yards of scintillating plate-glass windows south of the Plaza. The Wrexham Manufacturing Company—that is its official title; but not so long ago it had been known in the neighborhood of Maiden Lane as plain J. Wrexham & Company. The rise of this firm was one of the romances of modern business; from a backwater, the wave of prosperity and extravagance which followed the war landed it high and mighty on the Avenue.

Now, Joshua Wrexham was about the very last person whom you would think anybody, even a flaming Red, would want to murder. A shrewd but upright business man with never a word of scandal against his name, either in private or public life, a patron of arts, a good friend to the poor, a church worker without cant or self-boosting, an exemplary citizen with no jazz in his record—you might as well think of murdering a benevolent Newfoundland dog, which he somehow resembled even physically, being big and shaggy and long-nosed. Yet at five fifteen he had left his town house on Park Avenue to attend a business meeting of the firm—he was still chairman of the board—and at five thirty there was a bullet in his brain.

He had been killed on the Avenue, hardly a block from us, during that crepuscular period that I thought so mysterious and romantic. Mystery there certainly was, if not in the precise manner of his death. Somebody had taken a crack at him through the open window of the limousine—somebody passing by in a car on the right. The wound showed that, and it was improbable that a foot passenger could have done it unobserved. Highly improbable.

Not a case of suicide—apart from the lack of motive, there were no powder marks, no trace of a weapon. Nor, apparently, had he been robbed; for he was given to wearing a great deal of valuable jewelry, and this had not been touched.

You realize how easily, under such conditions, the crime was committed. Nothing could be seen distinctly, not even the flash of the weapon, for the murderer could have actually put his hand through the window of Wrexham's car, just as Miss Alston had put her hand on mine. No one had seen a flash, and Wrexham's chauffeur, isolated as he was, was ignorant that anything had happened out of the ordinary. It was a traffic cop who, as the car crawled past, saw Wrexham slumped against the seat, blood pouring down his face, silk hat jerked over one eye, and the lighted cigar, by some freak, still hanging in his relaxed jaw. Death had been instantaneous.

But the chauffeur was able to approximate the time when it must have happened. "Why, it can't be more'n a minute ago," he declared to the officer, "when the boss hollered to me through the tube. This funeral was gettin' him ratty, an' he told me to cut back to Madison at the next corner." Wrexham was alone and there was no doubt of it being his voice.

So that was why we were being interviewed by a detective, the police having acted promptly. The machinery functioned smoothly, the traffic tower did its stuff, and all traffic anywhere in the neighborhood was stopped on the instant. The murderer could not have gone far. It was ten to one that he and his car were in the vicinity, that he had been trapped before he could make his get-away down a side street. The police were making a car-to-car search; and they wanted to find a revolver with a silencer. A report might pass for a blow-out, but Wrex-

ham's chauffeur had heard nothing, nor had any one. Almost certainly a silencer had been used.

CHAPTER II.

SUSPECTS.

"YOU belong here?"

This from the detective to me. I guessed that he knew darned well that I didn't, and it was a good guess. Nor was it a mark in my favor that I had asked what had happened.

"You're the only people who don't know," he said. "And what was the idea of slipping your bus and jumping this one, huh?"

He was not a sentimental man, and I found it hard to impress him with the logic of the why and wherefore. Miss Alston backed me up royally, even going so far as to say that she had invited me in, but all we got for our efforts was the request to "step around to the house."

"No more'n a minute," assured the detective with a warm smile but cold eye. "A mere formality."

We "stepped" around in the car, our host beside the chauffeur. Evidently he was a person who took nothing for granted, not even the late Mr. Wrexham's unblemished reputation. *Cherchez la femme* was obviously another of his mottoes.

"Of course, you're my accomplice," I said to Miss Alston, "but I'll tell 'em you'd nothing to do with it."

"Thanks. I'll do the same for you."

"A bit awkward if that gun should turn up, say, under this seat."

"Yes. I hope you weren't so foolish as to hide it there."

"This is what comes of hobnobbing with an old friend whom one really knows nothing about."

"Exactly," she agreed.

Flippant? Yes, but death had lost its majesty for us long ago, murder its awe. We had seen too much of the legalized thing in France. That lesson, once learned, is never forgotten. Moreover, we were moderns, and moderns, one is assured often enough, have no reverence for anything.

"It's a lark," said I.

"It's a bore," said she. "And I shall miss my train."

Of course, the mere formality at the station house lasted more than a minute. After the matron had attended to Miss Alston—I had been searched already—we were taken into the "old man's" room and put over the jumps. You may think that, especially in regard to my companion, all this was very high-handed and that the police vastly exceeded their authority. Well, perhaps they did. But the detective had a card up his sleeve, not yet disclosed.

And I dare say we weren't the only ones detained that night on what might seem trifling evidence. I am no critic of the police. They get more kicks than kopecks; and, in a case like this, better to bag a dozen innocents than run the chance of the guilty sneaking free. There had been a lot of sensational holdups recently, and times were hard for gunmen.

Anyway, there was no use protesting, though I made a few remarks to O'Gorman, the detective, when I was being searched. It seemed that he was not a precinct detective, but was from headquarters, and had just happened to be in the neighborhood.

When Miss Alston had joined me in the back room, we were asked to give our names, addresses and occupations, and then O'Gorman proceeded to play what he evidently considered was his big ace. He produced a rose from his pocket and held it out in front of Miss Alston.

"Dropped something, huh?" he suggested. "Yes, that was lying on Mr. Wrexham's knee."

I must admit that it seemed quite a

respectable ace; and Miss Alston evidently thought so, too. Certainly she looked startled. You see, there was a small red rose of the same variety pinned in her smart little coat, and a broken stem showed where another had been.

"But this is absurd!" she exclaimed. "Why, there are dozens, hundreds of people wearing such roses! I'm sure there are. It's a common variety."

"Not so common," said O'Gorman, rocking on his heels. "At least Wrexham didn't wear one, nor anybody else in all that gang of cars. I made sure of that. You're the only one. Come now, why not tell the truth? We'll get it, anyway. You'll make it a lot easier for yourself if you come clean."

"I have told the truth. What more do you wish me to say?"

"You were in that car with Wrexham!" he declared, aiming a finger at her. "You were there long enough to pull the trick, and there's no use telling me different."

"I wasn't there. I tell you I never saw the man in all my life——"

O'Gorman pounced on that, like a terrier on a rat. How did she know what the dead man looked like?

"I don't," said Miss Alston. "But I mean I never knew anybody by the name of Wrexham. And the driver of my taxi will tell you——"

"I know all about that," broke in O'Gorman. "And I know where your friend boarded his bus, too. That ain't the point, even if the drivers are telling the truth. Nothing to stop anybody in that crawl stepping out of a bus and back again without the driver knowing. Nothing a-tall. I don't care, either, how that flower got there. But the owner of it killed Wrexham, and there's no getting away from it. Where'd you buy that rose?"

"I didn't buy it. I got it at Belvoir, Mr. Scunthorpe's place. Stemmer, the head gardener, gave me two this morning. You can prove that by asking him."

"Two," said O'Gorman. "And you wore both. No use denying it. What happened to the other one?"

"I gave it to a poor child who asked for it."

Now, I don't know how long this would have gone on, or what the end might have been, had there not come an interruption. It was questionable how much faith O'Gorman really had in his big ace, however confidently he played it. No weapon had been found on us, of course, nor in the taxis we had occupied, and there was really nothing to hold us on. But we might have been held in custody until the account we had given of ourselves had been verified. Miss Alston and I had no local friends on whom we felt we could call—acquaintances, perhaps, but none who knew any more about us than we did of each other. The name Carlyle Scunthorpe might stand for something in Hillcrest-on-the-Hudson, but it meant nothing to Gotham on the subway.

The interruption came in the person of Captain Calory of the State police, stationed near Hillcrest; and we were allowed to go. He had motored down in his small car and, as it was starting to rain, he offered to give us a lift to the Grand Central.

"Or," he added, "if you aren't in a hurry, and don't mind being a bit cramped, I can drop you in Hillcrest. This is my day off, and I've some business to attend to yet, but I shan't be more than half an hour. It's going to pour."

Miss Alston, saying she would be in time for the seven thirty, would not hear of troubling him further; but as it was already raining hard, and Calory was insistent, she consented to be dropped at the station.

"This is awfully good of you, captain," I said, as we all climbed in. "But

how did you know we'd got into such a jam?"

"Why," he replied, "I was crossing to the Avenue, wondering what the mob was about, when your taxi passed. I know O'Gorman by sight, glimpsed you two inside, and thought you'd been pulled for a traffic smash or something. I thought I might be of some help, that's all. Oh, no trouble at all—not a bit."

And, as if he had not done enough already, Calory insisted on seeing us aboard the train. Now all the time I thought that he knew Miss Alston far better than he knew me; but it turned out, after the train had pulled out, and we fell to talking, that he had never even spoken to her before.

"I passed him and some of his men the day I arrived at Belvoir," she said. "Of course, I was in the Scunthorpes' car, and he had probably heard who I was. One hears everything in a village. At the same time, it was surely decent of him to come forward and vouch for us like that."

I pointed out that the agreeable and obliging policeman hadn't really vouched for us. He had simply corroborated the information we had given concerning our identity.

"It's his business to hear things," I added, "and you may be sure he knows all about us—more than we know about each other."

"Well," she smiled, settling herself more comfortably, "I may undertake to listen, if you care to place me on an equal footing with Captain Calory."

"But I thought you remembered all about me?"

"All you ever told, which wasn't much. You were always better at talking nonsense. Are you really an artist, as you told the police?"

"Well, lots of people call me other things. I manage to make a living of a sort, which is something, these days. I do potty landscapes of the Hudson Valley, and any commercial work I can get."

"It must be a fearful handicap with —— Oh, I don't mean that!"

"Charlotte doesn't mind a bit," I assured her. "Not if you don't. And one eye's a whole lot better than none."

"It must be great fun to live like that—not to have to keep hours, and to be responsible to no one but yourself." She sighed, and her eyes clouded. "I thought of being an artist once—before everything went wrong."

"Tell me about it."

"Oh, nothing worth listening to. When we're very young we think parents and money—everything—will last forever; and then one day we awake to find everything gone. Only for the war, I shouldn't have known how to do a thing; and I've been earning my living ever since."

"Do you know that you're the third nurse at Belvoir during the past month?"

"I'm really a secretary companion," corrected Miss Alston. "So were the others; and they failed in one way or another."

"Mrs. Scunthorpe's a spiritist, isn't she? Believes in elementals, and all that sort of bunk. Well, she came to the right place. Maybe that's why she got her husband to buy Belvoir."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, haven't you heard yet of the fellow in the red armor? Turnover, of the *Banner*, told me. It seems that during Earl Manners' time—I suppose that was over a dozen years ago or more—the old boy in the lobster suit used to materialize and wander about, regardless of nights. Maybe he was trying to find a can opener. Those corrugated overalls must have been hot stuff on an August evening. Of course, you know what the house is modeled after, and its history?"

She was not listening. A man had passed along the aisle, coming, per-

haps, from the smoker. He wore a soft hat, pulled well down so that little of his face could be seen. Yet I knew him. I had glimpsed him in the Grand Central, standing near Captain Calory after we had boarded the train.

The obliging policeman, Calory, being unable himself to keep an eye on us all the way, might have detailed a shadow to finish the job. On the face of it, the man might be a perfectly harmless citizen; but there would have been plenty of time for O'Gorman, knowing their destination, to send a man to the station in case we declined Calory's offer of a lift home. These policemen always hang together.

I don't know if these conjectures occurred to my companion, but at all events she was pursuing some absorbing train of thought that precluded her from giving more than an occasional mechanical and monosyllabic comment on my further history of Belvoir. Nor had she regained her former lightness of touch when we reached Hillcrest.

Among the flivvers parked about the station there was a handsome maroon roadster, attended by a maroon-faced man in gray livery, which I knew had come from Belvoir.

"I hardly expected you, Skyrme," said Miss Alston.

"The missus said that you or the boss would be on this one sure," replied the chauffeur, as he touched his cap.

At this point I noticed the man with the slouch hat swing off the train just as it was about to pull out. He was the only other passenger for Hillcrest, and apparently he had been fast asleep in a corner when we left the day coach.

"Can I give you a lift, Mr. Stone?" asked Miss Alston. "From what I understand, you live out my way, not really in the town."

"Yes, but, thanking you all the same, I have to do some shopping. That's the penalty of living alone."

I really had to buy some provender, but I was also curious about the fellow in the slouch hat. So, after a few more words, I struck off toward Main Street, while the Scunthorpes' car turned at right angles for the South Road and the Hill.

CHAPTER III.

BELVOIR.

THE bungalow I had rented might be said to mark the high tide of Hillcrest's now forgotten realty boom, the last piece of flotsam cast up in the ambitious southward sweep. But the wave receding, or rather never actually materializing, the place had been left high and dry—except when it rained. The idea had been to make a residential quarter that would link up the two hills; but the streets and avenues had never got much farther than paper, and nature quickly won back the little that had been done.

It was a lonely spot, almost surrounded by vegetation, on the left-hand side of the State road as one went north down the hill that led to Hillcrest proper. Between it and the Hudson there was a steep, thickly wooded slope that gave on the railroad. My nearest neighbor was Carlyle Scunthorpe; for, taking a short cut through the woods, instead of going around by the road and on up the hill, one came to the big stone wall that surrounded Belvoir. That name, by the way, is pronounced as though it were spelled "Beever." A thoroughly English oddity.

My next nearest neighbor was to the north: Wallace Turnover, who had transformed another of the abandoned bungalows into a real home. He was a reporter on the *Banner,* the town's one and only paper. We were separated by perhaps two or three blocks; and scattered here and there amid the intervening space were the corpses of the stillborn colony—here simply a

weed-grown site or skeleton foundation, there a more or less finished structure. Then, passing Turnover's, one came to real houses, like Denker's and Viner's, and so to the town scrambling about the smaller hill. "The South Road," that was the local name for the stretch between Belvoir and Hillcrest proper.

Turnover had been very neighborly, and I owed him a good deal in the way of small-creature comforts, local information, and the like. I had rented the place from Denker and, though it had been represented as fully furnished, a lot was left to the imagination. Turnover seemed to have a surplus of everything, and the day I moved in, he came over with some odd blankets and things. He seemed to take it for granted that I had got the worst of the deal with Denker.

"You artists are all alike," he said, "and that bird would skin a flea for its hide. He ought to be darned glad you took the place at all. You know the last chap that lived here cut his throat; and old Manning killed himself, too, for that matter. And have you heard about the ghost?"

He proceeded to tell me the story of Belvoir and the man who had built it. And a curious story it was; the story of what money and a fixed idea may do for a man.

"It was long before I came here," said Turnover, "that he built that fake over there—for it's nothing but an imitation of an English castle."

"A good imitation," I said. "I've seen the original Belvoir in Leicestershire."

"Most people," he chuckled, "who take a trip on an Albany day liner think it's a jail or something. But, if you've seen the original, then you know it's owned by the Duke of Rutland, and that his family name is Manners. Well, that's what this bird called himself, though his real name was Peter Manning. You can kid yourself into believing anything."

"What was the idea?"

"Heavens knows," said Turnover. "Nobody knows where he came from, or how he made his money; but when he built that place over there he called himself 'P. Earl Manners.' Then he dropped the initial and became 'Earl Manners,' cousin or something to the Duke of Rutland. I don't mean to say he was crazy enough to openly make such a claim, but I do believe he finally succeeded in convincing himself that he actually was related to that historic family."

All the easier, when there are "authorities" who, if paid enough, will find one entitled to bear all sorts of crests. As a matter of fact, Manning's father had been born in the Vale of Belvoir, where he labored as a humble tiller of the soil before emigrating to America. And, no doubt, that fact, coupled with parental stories he had heard of the beautiful ancient castle, was the germ of the son's delusion. Perhaps he had dreamed of some day possessing such a home; then, when the money came, he put his dream into effect—and the rest followed naturally. For the influence of mere stone and brick can be powerful and real.

So the peasant's son became Earl Manners, and, if he made no open claim to the title, it pleased him hugely to be mistaken for a member of the British peerage. And, ignorance being what it is, it was wonderful how many took his Christian name for a title and believed his veiled and presumptuous assertions. He loved to travel about and spread his signature on hotel registers, wallow in a wholly spurious and temporary attention.

"I suppose there was no real harm in it," said Turnover, "and it might be called his particular form of dissipation. Moreover, most of us pretend to be something we're not. Anyway,

he didn't try to make money out of his false pretenses, and he didn't impose on any one who mattered. For all his wealth, society would have none of him; and those who enjoyed the hospitality of Belvoir, in the early days, were the ragtag and bobtail of the social world, as bogus as the place and himself."

Indeed, Hillcrest, whose only claim to notice in those days was the making of bricks, boasted of its "noble lord." It began with derision but ended with plaudits; went from attacking Manning to defending him. He gave tone to the place, and no other town could boast such a wealthy aristocrat or magnificent mansion. Climbers vied with one another in trying to get an invitation to one of the lavish functions on the Hill.

The strange part of all this sham was that Manning seemed to have put Hillcrest on the map. He did more for it, in a way, than all its bricks. He gave it its first taste of publicity, and people discovered that the little town straggling about the smaller hill—the larger, crowned by Belvoir, was always called locally "the Hill"—possessed many advantages, apart from a superb view of the Hudson and an increasingly rapid transit to the city. In short, if it was good enough for a millionaire, it was good enough for them. And so for a time Hillcrest had enjoyed quite a respectable boom.

"It was funny, but sad, too," said Turnover. "In time he actually claimed privately to be the Duke of Rutland's cousin. He said he had papers to prove it, if necessary; and he took great pride in displaying alleged heirlooms. He must have spent a fortune making a faithful copy of that castle, and in ransacking the junk shops of England. I guess dealers of all kinds made a pretty penny off him, though I wonder if Manning really believed that all he bought was genuine. They say he was a shrewd and suspicious bird in other ways, hard as the proverbial nails when it came to spending money on anything but this hobby of his."

Perhaps he finally penetrated the bogus nature of the horde of guests that came to Belvoir, and was angered at his failure to attract anything but climbers, adventurers, and parasites. For, it seemed that the best of the old families in the neighborhood never sought an invitation to the Hill. People were particular in those days, and Manning's hospitality, if lavish, was crude. "Though nowadays," said Turnover, "such parties as he gave might be considered tame."

At all events, he gave up playing the host; even abandoned travel, and immured himself at Belvoir. According to morbid local gossip, the fear of being murdered proved too strong for him at last, and he had shut himself up like Bishop Hatto.

"They said he hadn't made his money right, and that old man Nemesis was camping on his trail," explained Turnover. "I guess he was a joke to that gay mob he used to entertain. They drank his wines and ate his food, not really knowing or caring who or what he was. But after he shut himself up like a hermit crab, it was as easy to get into Belvoir without an invitation as to get out of Sing Sing without a pardon. And it was around or about this time that the legend of the Crimson Rambler became current locally."

Manning had first spoken of it on a sharp autumn evening when the leaves were blowing, and the blazing logs in the great hall shone redly on the stands of old armor that he claimed were heirlooms. Somebody wanted a ghost story, and Manning was only too glad to have the whole crowd as audience for the choicest of the family legends. Of course, nobody thought it that, if they thought at all. The man was

making it up, as he concocted other tales about the place and himself. But, in that setting, it wasn't a half-bad yarn. They yawned and forgot it.

The story got around locally, however, as such tales will, and, though dismissed with a laugh, it added interest to the great rectangular Gothic building, with the round central tower and flanking crenellated turrets, on the Hill. Only fitting and proper for such a place to have a spook, and, if Manning had not invented one, perhaps somebody would have. Lovers, given to making their tryst in the lonely woods about the place, were warned jokingly to watch out for it. A local jest, soon forgotten.

"It was only after Manning had fired most of the staff, and shut himself up, that Belvoir really associated itself in the local mind with anything sinister," said Turnover. "And perhaps what started it was that the place itself began to look sinister. Manning seemed to have lost all interest in its outward appearance—like a child who has tired of a plaything—and to be concentrating more and more on the history of the family of which it was supposed to be a symbol, as it were. He now declared himself to be the rightful Duke of Rutland, and said that, because he was preparing to establish his title, there were plots afoot to murder or kidnap him."

It was impossible to say how much of all this was idle or malicious village gossip. There seemed to be no question, however, that Manning had now spent all his time poring over alleged proofs of his claim, and in writing an interminable monograph on the subject, not unlike Mr. Dick and the head of King Charles. No question that his idle fancy had grown into a delusion, the delusion into an obsession, and that on this particular matter he was quite insane.

"Crazy as a cootie," Turnover had wound up. "All sorts of wild stories got around, and more than one person claimed to have seen the Crimson Rambler. Nobody would go near Belvoir after dark. Then Manning killed himself; and not one of his former alleged friends, not a relative, attended the funeral. Nobody really seemed to know anything about him, and nobody cared. Poor old son of a gun, I guess he had a hard time of it."

For a good many years Belvoir, that monument to the futility of money and the vanity of man, remained vacant. It seemed that a distant cousin in England, who proved Manning's origin, came into the estate. Its liquid assets turned out to be far smaller than people expected. A realty company bought the house and park, and found their bargain to be a white elephant.

Nobody wanted the place. It had a bad name; and the house was too big. Nobody wanted to pay a lot of money for a feudal castle, furnished like a museum, and a ghost. The plan of cutting up the estate into building lots never materialized; the boom days of Hillcrest were over, and the place was falling back into its sleepy obscurity. Property values were finding their true level. Times were hard. Belvoir seemed to carry an atmosphere of bad luck, for the company that bought it failed, and it changed hands again more than once.

But if time had not improved it in some respects, at least, its ghost was being laid, its history well-nigh forgotten. The war brought a brand-new crop of millionaires. Times were good. And so Carlyle Scunthorpe eventually bought the place.

Harrington, the former tenant of the bungalow I had rented, was the last person who claimed that he had seen the Crimson Rambler. But, as he had committed suicide during delirium tremens, poor Harrington must have been in the habit of seeing more than that.

CHAPTER IV.

MY NEIGHBORS.

I THINK perhaps that Turnover, after telling me such gory tales, had expected me to clear out in a week, and I must admit that there were nights when I found my new home anything but festive. Nothing for immediate neighbors but the sinister bulk of the Hill, the skeletons of the defunct colony, trees, and rank vegetation. Not a light anywhere but a far-distant arc on the South Road, or the twinkle of a passing boat, for Belvoir was completely blanketed by its wall and the trees.

Not a sound but the rumble of a passing train, a hoot from craft on the river, the honk of a motor horn, or the faint click of hoofbeats as one of Captain Calory's men passed on his lonely patrol. All this was intermittent, infrequent, while continually there was the stir of the wind in the trees, and all those thousand and one sounds—particularly eerie to the ears of the city-bred—attendant on the night life of the woods.

After my first few nights I could well believe that an imaginative man—Harrington had been a writer of sorts—might be able to see things without the aid of a bottle. Yes, a far from festive place; but then I had not sampled No Man's Land for nothing—those awful night stories in France.

During my first week Turnover always appeared with an expression in his eyes—they lay out on his face somewhat, as though alert for news—that seemed to say, "What! Still here and alive? Haven't cut your throat yet? What a shame! It would have made such a whale of a story for the front page."

I wondered if his neighborliness was inspired by natural good nature, or natural and acquired curiosity. He was the kind of person who is always first at a fight or fire, poking into a stalled automobile, or picking up the baby, offering help on problems of which he might know nothing. On the face of it, he was one of these Johnny-at-the-rat-hole, know-it-all, small-town reporters. But I fancied there was more to him than that; and the small-town men of to-day are the big-town men of to-morrow. He was a good reporter, I heard, and he was ambitious—ambition meaning Newspaper Row, Herald or Times Square.

"I wish," he said one day, "that all this stuff about old Manning, or even Harrington's suicide, had happened in *my* time. I'd have worked it up for a good job in the Big Town. Nothing ever happens here now but hardening of the arteries."

I suppose it was only natural for him to be inquisitive about me, but I can be pretty good at asking questions myself, and at evading those I consider too personal. His hours of work being what they were, he was always popping over when least expected.

When he found I had no intention of cutting my throat or—despite his stories—of clearing out, and also that I could break ninety, for all of Charlotte, he got me in as a temporary member of the local golf club. I had a round with him one day, met a few people I cared nothing about, and ended by nearly braining a fat little man on the fifth green.

"Damnation!" the victim roared, as my ball skidded off his straw hat. "The fellow drove into me! Very nearly had my life. What's this club coming to?"

Turnover was doubled up behind the tee box where he had ducked. I had taken his assurance that the distance was a full iron shot. When the visibility is deceptive, Charlotte rather helps to make it worse. But, of course, I should have looked up the distance on the box.

"Nearly got him!" chortled Turnover. "That's Homer P. Viner."

The other half of the twosome turned out to be Carlyle Scunthorpe. It seemed that this couple, together with Denker and Ronald Hungerford, Scunthorpe's brother-in-law, were known locally on the links as the "Creeping Pestilence." We all have a name, if we only knew it.

"I'm no Bobby Jones myself," admitted Turnover unnecessarily, "but at least I know it, and I've the decency to let those who *can* play go through. Those birds wouldn't let the Almighty Himself through, though they can't play for sour apples. They think they own the course."

I apologized when we caught up to the couple on the next tee—indeed, they were waiting for us—but I might better have saved my breath. Viner was merely ludicrous, looking, in his swollen and bald state, like a puffball; but Scunthorpe had a bitter and imperious tongue.

"No need to lose your temper," I told him amiably. "Nobody will offer a reward for it."

That started him on another oration: Turnover should know better than to bring a visitor who was totally ignorant of the rules, and, if I had only one eye, I shouldn't be allowed on a golf course. This from a couple that knew, but never obeyed a single golfing rule. For I learned that even when playing a threesome with Denker, or a four-baller with Hungerford, they refused to let a twosome pass—or at least nobody dared demand it. The only thing to do was to get away before the Creeping Pestilence started.

"Oh, it's all right to talk," said Turnover when, in desperation, we cut in at the seventeenth; "but this is Hillcrest, not Garden City. Denker leases the ground to the club, Scunthorpe's president, Viner's captain, and Hungerford's honorary secretary. *They're* the council. Why, Scunthorpe in particular thinks he's honoring the community if he deigns to cut divots. Sort of lord-of-the-soil idea, like old Manning."

So that was why Miss Alston had evidently heard me referred to by her employer as that "unspeakable person." And, not remembering the name of Stone, she had no idea that she knew me.

I wondered if Belvoir had begun to influence its new owner as it had influenced Manning, for certainly Scunthorpe seemed to look down on his neighbors as the Hill looked down on Hillcrest. With the exception of Viner and Denker, he did not seem to consider any one eligible as a regular visitor. Of course, there was Doctor Dugdale, but I imagined he was more welcome in his professional than in his private capacity.

At all events, I had evidently started off on the wrong foot with my rich and powerful neighbor, for though he certainly knew who I was, and I met him several times on the train when business took me to New York, he never acknowledged my existence by so much as a nod. And then Denker dropped in casually one day, as though smitten by conscience. He had a heavy face, booming voice, and bulging neck. Turnover said he bet Denker had made a fortune out of peddling a fake corn cure before he came to Hillcrest and became *the* local realtor.

"This place needs an entire overhauling, Stone," he said in his familiar booming manner, jingling the loose change in his striped pockets, and apparently noticing for the first time all that the place lacked. "Had no idea it was so bad. Why, it isn't fit for a dog fight! My office shouldn't have rented it in this condition, and you shouldn't have taken it. No business man would have. How long is your lease?"

Now, it was true I had been shown the place by one of Denker's employees, but I had signed the lease in the presence of the principal himself. Apparently he was above recollecting such trivial business.

"A year?" he echoed, poking contemptuously at some of poor Harrington's cheap furniture. "Good Lord, you can't expect to pass the winter in a dump like this?"

"I've passed winters in worse."

"Now look here," he said, in a very benign and virtuous manner, "this won't do, Stone. I wouldn't have rented this place to my worst enemy; but some of those boys in my office are so sharp—well, no matter. Tell you what I'm willing to do, though: I can let you have a really first-class place, right near town, for only fifty dollars more. How's that?"

I thanked him and declined, whereupon his heavy jaw sagged, and he looked astounded. At length he began to knock down the price.

"Rather than have it said," he declared finally, "that Sam Denker let anybody in for a proposition like this."

I expressed my gratitude and declined again, and he shrugged and left in his car. But the next day he dropped in as casually. He had thought it over and now decided to let me have the other place for the same price.

"Of course, it's the bargain of a thousand years!" he boomed. "Anybody could tell you that. I'm no philanthropist, Stone; but what I'll drop on this deal I'll make up on others. What I mean is that it would hurt my business more to have it said that I soaked you on this place. A man has only got one reputation to lose, and honesty is the best policy because it's the most paying policy. That's what I've built my name on—honesty. I wasn't responsible for this deal, and I won't stand behind it. I tell you I'd no idea this place was so bad."

I suggested that, if he felt so upset about it, he could knock off the fifty dollars on this place; but he said that wasn't the point. And he was all for bustling me off, bag and baggage, right there.

"No," I said, "if I'd wanted another place, I'd have taken it in the first instance. Cheapness wasn't my only consideration. I chose this place, and I mean to stay here."

"How do you mean, 'chose it?'" he asked slowly.

"Why, just that. I could get a finer house, but not a finer view. And the view is everything—my bread and butter. You couldn't move it about like my baggage."

"Oh, I see. You're a nut like Harrington." He stuck a cigar in his mouth and blinked at my array of canvases. "But you could mosey up here any time you liked to do your stuff. I'd give you permission. And you'd be living in real comfort."

"It wouldn't be the same. That view means more than material food. I've been searching for just such a spot as this for ever so long. All views may look alike to you, but not to me."

"It's the last place *I'd* come to," he grunted. "It would give me the willies. Let me tell you something: Harrington killed himself, and no wonder."

"Yes, Wally Turnover told me. He also seemed to think I shouldn't stay here. He told me, too, about the Crimson Rambler."

"Poppycock!" boomed Denker. "Crimson grandmother! You believe what that fellow tells you, and you can believe I'm Norma Talmadge. He's a reporter, isn't he? Well, then he can lie faster than a horse can trot, and he'd scrag his own mother to make a news story. I've told you why I'd rather you moved——"

He started all over again to urge me, and, failing that, compel me by sheer force of pertinancy; for he was given to riding people down, so to speak. And when he found that I could be as unimpressionable as my name, he grew angry and let the cat out of the bag. It seemed that Scunthorpe did not care particularly for me as a neighbor.

"Being a tenant here," said Denker, "doesn't give you the right to go where you please, and you'd better understand that right now. Mr. Scunthorpe won't have you trespassing on his property."

"He doesn't own the woods between here and Belvoir," I retorted. "Nor do you. It's public land, and I can use it as I choose, so long as I don't make myself a nuisance, the same as anybody else. Evidently Mr. Scunthorpe hasn't forgiven me for that accident on the links."

"Maybe not. But there's a difference between using the woods and climbing into other folks' back yards of nights."

"Who says I climb into back yards?" I demanded. "I sketch in the woods, and I'll continue to do so; but you'd better be careful how you charge people with trespassing. Of course, I'm interested in Belvoir, as in all beautiful places, but if I ever want the privilege of sketching it, I'll ask the owner. And I don't paint at night."

"Well," he said, with considerably less assurance, after giving me a long stare, "I'm only warning you, and for your own good. Trespassers are liable to get a dose of buckshot in the summer kitchen, and no questions asked. Mr. Scunthorpe has suffered a lot from tramps who try to squat here in the summer; and there are quite respectable folks who think they've the right to every fruit and flower that isn't in a store. You haven't seen anybody prowling about?"

I told him I had more to do than play warden for Belvoir, and he seemed inclined to smooth my ruffled feathers.

"Well, no offense," he said, proffering a cigar which I declined. "I'll tell you how it is. It was Mrs. Scunthorpe who said she saw a strange man in the grounds the other night, about your height."

"My height is your own height, the height of nine men out of ten."

"Well, that's so," he agreed. "And, between ourselves, maybe Mrs. Scunthorpe sees things nobody else does. Know what I mean? But her husband thought it might be you, and he came to me about it. But I see now it's all right, though I wish you'd take that bargain I'm offering. Maybe you'll think it over."

Turnover had told me that Mrs. Scunthorpe dabbled in the occult, it being common knowledge in the neighborhood; otherwise, I suppose, Denker would not have mentioned it. She had written several books on the subject. But of these and her alleged psychic gifts I was in no position to judge. I thought, however, that Turnover made a wise, if trite, remark when he said that it was hard to know in such matters where hysteria and self-delusion ended and truth began.

"She's the neurotic type that always has to have a doctor hanging about," he told me. "Dugdale struck a gold mine when she came here. I don't blame him, of course. He needs the money, and if it wasn't him, it would be somebody else. He gives her bread pills and colored water, plays up to her nerves."

When Scunthorpe had found I was not going to move, he set a sort of watch on me, for all of Denker's word as to my honesty. At least, the chauffeur, Skyrme, and the head gardener, Stemmer, began to take a sudden interest in the woods. More than once I saw them watching me at work on a

canvas when they thought themselves hidden. A Claude Lorraine glass can be very useful for more than reflecting the landscape. And then, as I have explained, Captain Calory of the State police found occasion to make my acquaintance.

Such was the position of affairs when I renewed my old friendship with Shirley Alston.

CHAPTER V.

A FRIENDLY WARNING.

ON Sunday, the morning following my meeting with Miss Alston in New York, Turnover arrived as I finished cleaning up after breakfast. He never stood on ceremony, nor indeed did the bungalow admit of much, especially in the warm weather. "On board the scow!" he would shout, and follow immediately through the ever-open door into the living room, which led precipitately into the kitchen, bathroom, and two alleged bedrooms. There was nothing more to the place than this but the roof.

"What's all this about you murdering a plutocratic jeweler?" he shouted, waving a paper. "Aha! So that's your business in New York—doing little deeds of darkness like this? It wasn't neighborly of you not to tell me it was coming off, give me the chance of a scoop. But now you can hand me a front page for the good old *Banner*. 'The Murderer's Own Story.' All the intimate details, if you please. Come, be neighborly."

I swore.

"You don't mean to say they've got Miss Alston's name in the thing?" I demanded.

"Aha! So she had a hand in the job? Better and better. I'll run over to Belvoir after I've had your full confession."

I snatched at the New York daily, and he threw it at me with a grin.

"No, your name isn't there, nor hers, either. You figure merely as among those present. How, then, did I know? Oh, you can't keep anything from 'Little Pop Eyes.' When the word came in over the wire last night, I just knew it was you. That's why you took this place, to plan crimes in solitude. Isn't it, now?"

"My next murder will be you," I said, when, after a searching scrutiny, I found that my name and Miss Alston's were not mentioned in the paper. "I hope you'll be good enough to keep the result of your intuition out of the local rag. I suppose Captain Calory told you about us? Personally I don't mind publicity, for, according to advertising values these days, a landscape by a popular suspected murderer would fetch a far-better price than one by a virtuous but obscure genius. But it wouldn't do Miss Alston any good. Scunthorpe isn't the sort of man to appreciate notoriety."

"It's too late, my friend," said Turnover, as we went out on the veranda. "It was Viner, not Calory, who tipped me off. But Scunthorpe himself was in the Big Town yesterday."

I had not seen him on the train, but I remembered the chauffeur saying that he was waiting for the boss.

"I guess half Hillcrest was there, as it generally is of a Saturday," added Turnover; "and somebody saw, or heard of, you being pulled. Viner stopped in at the office to tell me; and what he knows, Scunthorpe knows. They all came back together—the Creeping Pestilence and a dozen more—on the theater train."

"I dare say Viner hopes I did kill Wrexham. But Scunthorpe couldn't have known anything about it at the time, or he'd have come forward, like Captain Calory, and spoken up for Miss Alston."

"I don't know that he would," said Turnover. "As you say, he's too imperial to get mixed up in any notoriety.

Viner said he'd heard you'd been arrested with a woman who gave the name of Alston, and he wondered if it could be the same. I saw you and her arrive together last night, and I guessed the answer. But I wasn't dead sure she was the woman in the case until you told me yourself."

"You mean the woman out of the case. There's no mystery about this thing, Turnover, and I dare say Miss Alston would have told her employer about it, anyway. We were the victims of circumstance, and it could happen to any one. But if the New York papers were good enough to keep our names out of it, the *Banner* can do the same."

"News is news, Stone. And I guess the real reason the New York papers kept it out was because they didn't know. They had no Viner to tell 'em what the police didn't. And, now that you've confirmed it, it'll be in the *Banner* to-morrow. Yes, sir."

"Denker said you'd scrag your own mother to make a news story, and I believe he's right. Look here: Wrexham's death, as Calory told me, isn't going to be any sensational case. They'll soon clear it up; and you'll miss nothing by keeping our names out of it."

"Sorry, but it can't be done," he said, striking a virtuous attitude. "I've a journalistic conscience. What mayn't be news for New York is news for Hillcrest. 'Local Couple's Adventure. Arrested by Mistake in the Wrexham Case.' You see? Why, darn it all, I couldn't keep it out if I tried! Viner has spread it all over the place by this time, and the truth is better than conjecture."

"Well, I dare say that's right," I agreed. "I was only thinking to save Miss Alston annoyance." And with that Captain Calory appeared, striding down the rudimentary weed-grown path, flanked with the everlasting trees that led to the South Road. He was in uniform now, the reins of his horse looped over an arm.

"Here comes the law to arrest you," said Turnover jovially, and waved a greeting.

"*Phew!* it's hot," said Calory. "I'd rather be in the water than the saddle." He removed his slouch hat and, accepting my invitation, turned loose the horse, sat down and crossed his spurred legs, while he eased the automatic that swung waist-high in his cartridge belt.

"Well, just a minute," he assented; and I brought out some lemonade and passed the cigarettes. "Got home safely, you and Miss Alston? Unfortunate experience. Seems to have got around already, as I suppose our local scribe was telling you. Viner isn't a friend of yours?"

"Hardly," said Turnover, and told of my exploit on the links. "If you knew what's what in this burg, you'd know what a sacrilege that was, especially with Scunthorpe present."

Evidently there was much that Calory did not know—I gathered that he had not been long in his present berth—for he began a still hunt after information. Had I known Miss Alston before she came here? Was New York her home? How had I happened to meet her yesterday? And so on. All this was done very adroitly and without appearing to ask. He was a clever man, and a good deal older than he appeared at the first glance. Older, at least, in hard experience. I fancied that his pleasant offhand manner concealed a good deal. His mouth, if one could surprise it in repose, was grim.

Apparently he was satisfied that I knew no more about the girl than I actually did, for presently he began to talk about my work, expressing a flattering interest and asking to see some of it.

"Don't bother; I'll step in," he said. And he did so, getting up very quickly

with the effortless ease of the trained athlete.

His keen, but apparently casual, eye saw more than the canvases, for he spotted what Turnover had not—a .38 Colt which I had just finished cleaning when the reporter barged in.

"Loaded?" he asked, picking it up from behind a box of paints on the window seat.

"When I remember to. It's a lonely place at night, and it would be useful against tramps, if not ghosts."

He nodded and put it back, but not before I had glimpsed him skillfully insert the screwed end of a handkerchief in the barrel. It amused me, for all he got was an oil stain.

"Ghosts," he mused, as we returned to the veranda. "I suppose you've been hearing of the Crimson Rambler? Haven't seen him, have you?"

"Why, is he supposed to be on the loose again?"

"I don't know," smiled Calory, "but I heard some talk of Mrs. Scunthorpe seeing it last night. What are the rights about this fairy tale, anyway? I've only heard scraps, all more or less different."

"Ask Turnover," I replied. "He's the local historian."

"Well, its based on a certain amount of fact, like every legend," said the reporter, as we lighted fresh cigarettes. "I mean, you'll find the original account in a quaint old book written in the Middle Ages by a Frenchman styling himself Hippolyte of Falaise. Manning had it in his library, and old Grove saw it."

The last person thus referred to was Turnover's former employer, now dead, editor of the Hillcrest *Banner,* who had had something more than a local reputation as a scholar.

"You mean Falaise in Normandy?" I asked. "The town where William the Conqueror was born? I know, of course, that the original Belvoir was built in the tenth century by a standard bearer of the Duke of Normandy."

"That's right," nodded Turnover. "Well, in the early days old Grove was rather intimate with Manning for a time, for he was about the only one who could appreciate the things that Manning loved to show off. I suppose you know his history?"

"Who, Manning?" asked Calory. "I've heard something, of course, since I came here, but I don't know how true it is."

Thereupon, Turnover proceeded to relate what I have set down concerning Belvoir and its builder. He had it pat, like one of the guides that show you through Versailles.

"Now, I'm not saying that the facts in this book are true, or that even the book itself is genuine," he went on. "Old Grove had his doubts about it. According to all report, Manning wasn't what you could call cultured, and he got soaked with more than one artistic fake. In fact, that's how he fell out with Grove, because he wouldn't stand for any criticism of his treasures. But about the spook——"

It was a grim story, and somehow it seemed the more grim, by contrast, when told here in the sparkling sunlight and open air. Turnover had first related it to me while the rain dripped from the trees and night closed down on this desolate spot, but I was less affected then than now. Perhaps in the meantime I had been thinking too much about it unconsciously, or now he went into more grisly details. Like the Pickwickian fat boy, it almost seemed as though he found a pleasure in trying to make one's flesh creep.

Calory was interested, if not impressed, and his first question showed the logical working of his mind.

"But what I want to know is why a French-English spook should take out American citizenship papers?" he

said. "I can understand how it got transferred from Normandy to Leicestershire, but why the Hudson? Why leave its ancestral halls and take up with a lunatic? Manning had no right to it, any more than he had the right to style himself Earl Manners."

"Well, now," said Turnover, "we leave the world of sobriety and fact and enter the realm of the fourth dimension and high finance and psychoanalysis and national politics—all those wonderful and mysterious things that are beyond even my understanding. You'd better ask Mrs. Scunthorpe to explain it. But, as far as I can make out, you can transplant spooks just the same as any material thing—because they inhabit the material thing."

"Yes," I said, "if you moved the castle of Bernstein from the Austrian Burgenland to the north pole, its famous White Lady would still go on walking, like Felix, as she's been doing since the thirteenth century. But the original Belvoir still stands."

"The spook didn't originate in the original Belvoir," said Calory. "I see what our friend means. You mean, Turnover, that it inhabits the suit of armor said to have been worn by 'Le Promeneur Cramoisi,' the suit Manning claimed to have bought? I suppose he walked in and offered the Duke of Rutland ninety-eight cents for it—as between relatives?"

"Manning claimed to have bought it in the Tower of London," replied Turnover. "It's a fact, of course, that there are periodic sales of old armor and weapons there. I expect he got a lot of stuff that way."

"And it's still there?" asked Calory, nodding at the Hill.

"Yes, only the modern stuff was auctioned off. All this other junk was stored in a room in one of the wings, and it has been lying there since Manning died."

"Well," I said, "I can imagine the original heirs of the owner of that tin suit not wanting it particularly, and its finding its way to the White Tower in London, where there's a fine collection of antique ghosts; but if Scunthorpe has no use for spooks, all he has to do is sell the thing to the Ford Motor Company."

"Why, in that case," replied Turnover, who did not seem to think I had made rather a good joke for a hot day, "he'd have to sell every blooming stand of armor in the place, and I believe there's over a dozen. For he doesn't know which one belongs to the Crimson Rambler. Nobody did but Manning. The color? You couldn't tell anything by that, for they're all more or less red with rust, and the original paint was worn off long ago. And, anyway, Scunthorpe's the last person to believe in anything supernatural."

"Well, this fellow Manning seems to have been quite a card," said Calory. "Where did he come from, and how did he make his money?"

Turnover shrugged and spread his hands.

"White slaving, running a bucket shop, peddling hop—take your choice. Nobody knows, but most everybody had the idea that there must have been something dirty about it. If the Volstead act had been in force then, I suppose they'd have said he got it bootlegging. Why? I don't know. Why do you get ideas about people?"

"And he went crazy and killed himself?" pursued Calory, tossing aside his cigarette. "Poor devil! I'll say he had imagination, anyway—too much of it. From making up a yarn about himself, he makes up one about a suit of armor. Some yarn."

He arose and straightened his belt, then whistled to the horse which ceased its cropping and came instantly to hand. A fine, well-trained animal.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, boys,"

said Calory, and his mouth looked grim under its smile. "I guess maybe somebody has been on the prowl of nights about Belvoir. If I catch him at it"—and he tapped his automatic—"he'll be crimson, all right, but he won't do any more rambling for a time. So long."

"That's a friendly warning, my friend," said Turnover, as we watched Calory disappear. "Better take to heart."

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF BARSAC DE ROSE.

CONTRARY to Captain Calory's confident prediction, the murderer of Joshua Wrexham was not speedily caught, nor, despite O'Gorman's cynical attitude, did there appear to be any ugly hidden thing in the career of the victim that would point to a solution. I mean, he had not been leading a double life, and there was no woman in the case. To quote a New York paper:

> The books of his private life are as straight as those of his firm. There has been no juggling, no evasion of the Almighty's audit. The plain, honest record is there for all to see; and those who expected a choice scandal and sensational murder mystery must look elsewhere.
>
> It becomes increasingly obvious that robbery was the motive for the crime, Mr. Wrexham's habit of carrying a fortune in jewelry being no secret. He was the victim of the modern type of bandit, whose daring and audacity seems to have no limit. But in this instance, the scoundrels—there must have been two at least—were scared off before making their haul.
>
> The rumor that a woman was concerned in it has proved to be unfounded. The murderer will be discovered when the master mind behind all these recent robberies and holdups is discovered and brought to book.

"You see?" I said to Turnover. "Quite a simple matter, not worth the mention of Miss Alston's name and mine."

"What I see is that the wealthy jeweler was plugged with a .38 Colt," he retorted. "You have one, as Calory discovered."

"Yes, but I was searched at the station house, and so was Miss Alston. How do you reconcile that?"

"Oh, there are ways for a clever duck like you."

"But how about a one-eyed duck?"

"You don't need a right eye. Your golf proves that. I haven't given up hope of you, Stone. You'll make a front page yet. You were in New York that day."

"And a few other locals, from all accounts. Maybe you were there yourself, for all I know."

"Well," he said, "a handsome robbery or two would help to eke out my princely stipend; but, as between neighbors, I shouldn't try Belvoir. However, you know best. I believe Mrs. Scunthorpe has some very fine jewelry."

This sort of joshing was all very well, but I got home one day toward the end of the week to find that somebody had been there before me. A trifling matter—to enter the bungalow; but this was the work of no ordinary prowler. I should not have known any one had been there, but for a time-honored trick. The silk thread I had placed cunningly near the hinges of my suit case was broken. But my trunk had defied their efforts. Or perhaps they had been frightened off.

Turnover's journalistic curiosity? Or was it Calory searching for the silencer? Or the man in the slouch hat who had accompanied us that night from New York? Or was it Skyrme and Stemmer? Perhaps even Denker anxious to humor Scunthorpe and discover if I was what I professed to be. There were so many answers that I decided to say nothing but give them another go at the trunk.

Accordingly, the next day I left very publicly on the noon train for New York, slipped off at the next station to

Hillcrest, walked up the railroad tracks, scaled the wooded bluff, and arrived in time to find Miss Alston investigating one of the windows.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, whirling around. "How you startled me! You've no right to walk like—like a ghost. Where did you come from? Oh, do you *live* here? Is *this* what they call the Harrington bungalow? I was taking a walk through the woods, and I was just wondering if any one lived here. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. A very natural mistake, seeing that the woods are simply bursting with bungalows. But we'll get in easier through the door. There really is one."

"I haven't the least desire to go inside. Do you think I intended forcing a window if you hadn't come? And I tell you I'd no idea you lived here."

"That's obvious; otherwise you'd have been over long ago."

"I? And for what?"

"Why, to invite Charlotte and me for afternoon tea at Belvoir. You overlooked it that night."

"Mr. Scunthorpe wouldn't let you in. He thinks you're one of the most impudent young men he ever met—and he's right."

"Bless him for that word 'young.' I can forgive the rest. But you see now why I couldn't give myself the pleasure of a neighborly call, apart from the fact that you'd forgotten to invite me. However, now that you've done the sensible thing and called on me, we can have tea here."

Of course, she had no intention of calling on me, and, of course, she would not dream of having tea—but she did, after all, being a very sensible and obliging person.

I brought out all the implements on the veranda, and she set the table and lighted the alcohol stove without it backfiring and soaking everything in sight, the way it insists on doing with me. And the sandwiches instantly ceased to be an inch thick, and the butter stopped imitating vaseline, and many other marvels did she perform in the name of woman.

"It's dreadful to pig it like this," she said, with an all-seeing, accusing eye. "It's a wonder you haven't poisoned yourself long ago, or got typhoid or pneumonia or something."

It transpired that Saturday was her day off, and the previous one she had dedicated to shopping in New York. That brought us to the Wrexham murder, and mention of Turnover and Calory. It seemed that both had been to Belvoir, the scribe for a personal account of our adventure, and the policeman ostensibly to see Scunthorpe.

"I know," I sighed. "Your employer thinks I've designs on the family plate or his wife's jewelry. I understand that she really has some worth stealing."

Yes, she was fond of jewelry. What woman isn't? And there was a rose diamond said to be worth a great sum, though Miss Alston had not seen it.

"It's too bad," she said, "that Mr. Scunthorpe has taken a dislike to you."

"He has a horrible temper," I remarked. "You must suffer from it."

"No, I don't. He has always been most kind and considerate. He's very highly strung, though, on edge from overwork."

"But what work does he do?" I protested. "He has retired. Made his money in munitions, like Viner, didn't he?"

"Yes, a big powder plant in Delaware."

"And now, having sold out, he has nothing to do but sit back and clip coupons. I'd like some hard work like that."

"Well, then, lack of work," she suggested. "It's bad for a man to retire so comparatively young. He can hardly be fifty. One should get more

out of business than mere money. And it's far better to wear out than rust out."

But I was not to think that clipping coupons entailed no work; if the vast business had been sold, there remained the proceeds to look after. It kept Scunthorpe and his secretary busy. There was a ticker in the study and a private wire.

"What's this about Mrs. Scunthorpe actually seeing the old ghost?" I asked at length. "Calory was telling me."

"I want you to tell me all about the Crimson Rambler," said Miss Alston, with ill-concealed avidity. "I now know you weren't fooling that night. Mr. Scunthorpe won't let it be mentioned. He says it's all rot, of course."

"Did he know of the legend when he took Belvoir?"

Evidently not, otherwise he might not have bought it, refusing as he did to pander to his wife's "rank superstition." But he had been good-natured about it, more ironically amused than otherwise, until her alleged experience in the regent's gallery. Then he had blown up, so to speak, and forbade the subject to be mentioned.

"And I never heard all the details of the story," complained Miss Alston.

"Perhaps you can read them for yourself some day," I said, and told of the book described by Turnover. "They say all of Manning's things weren't sold, so it may be in the library. But though the name of Le Promeneur Cramoisi was De Rose, you mustn't confuse him with the De Ros heiress that married into the Manners family."

"Thank you," she said, "but I do know a little French. *Ros* means reed. Weavers' combs are called that because originally they had teeth of reeds. It comes from the old German *raus*. But, of course, rose comes from the Latin *rosa*, and it's the same in French as in English."

"Correct. Go to the head of the class. Well, in a nutshell, this Norman knight, Barsac de Rose, had a homicidal passion for justice. He wasn't content with infidels and dragons, and such conventional knightly fare, but laid about him with his good right arm wherever he saw the head of iniquity. Not openly, you understand, but in secret session. Nowadays, I suppose, he'd be a member of the Ku Klux Klan, or a Communist, or a boarder at Matteawan."

"It doesn't sound very thrilling," she remarked, with a reproachful glance.

"Well, I haven't Turnover's gift for horrors, and there's a humorous angle to everything—although I suppose the selected victim didn't think it very funny when he awoke in the dead of night to see the figure in red armor standing by his bed, or when he met him face to face in the moonlit woods. Of course, justice in those days was even more a matter of money than it is to-day, and so his victim was usually some smug and powerful lad who did his dirty work under the egis of the law.

"I don't think it's a matter of record whether it was an overdeveloped sense of equity, for his time and generation, or some unfortunate personal experience that started friend Barsac on his private crimson career; but, anyway, he appointed himself a sort of walking tribunal and guillotine. Yes, I know the guillotine wasn't invented then.

"Well, he roamed the countryside, and when he came on any grievous wrong that had no redress at law, found some poor wight badly stymied by a powerful opponent, he settled it with a full iron shot. And he always appeared at these functions in full dress, even to his high tin hat.

"As you can imagine, this sort of hobby got a bit wearing on those who

had to pay for it, but for long enough nobody knew the identity of Le Promeneur Cramoisi. At length, however, they caught him at it one fine evening, and he came to a sticky end. But, like John Brown's body, his soul went marching on. Maybe others, seeing the beauty and simplicity of the idea, took to night riding and red armor when Barsac was scragged, paying off their own pet scores that way. Anyhow, according to the old Norman legend, his ghost carried on for some time."

"Is it part of the record—if one can call it that—that the original suit of armor passed to a descendant who came over to England?"

"Yes. And the author gives it as the explanation why the ghost suddenly gave up the job and was never seen or heard of again in Normandy. Also, he subscribes to the popular belief that it was vested, you might say, in the armor. Barsac de Rose was killed in that suit, and it was a very substantial garment, equivalent to a portable tin house. If spooks haunt ordinary houses, why not such a one?"

"The real point," said Miss Alston, "is that it was symbolic of himself. It represented the monomania of which he had become possessed."

"That's true enough. It was even more than his official residence or business office, for they wore those tin suits as we'd wear bath robes. No doubt, it cramped their style a bit, but at least it foiled the mosquitoes. I suppose he had it distempered that color in tribute to his name and its sanguinary office. Or maybe he was partial to red. Ladies, as well as gentlemen, may have preferred blondes in those days."

"I do wish you'd try to be serious for once. This is most interesting. The material body that garment housed having departed, the spirit remains. Quite logical and inevitable."

I asked if she really believed in that sort of thing,

"I'm not saying I believe," she finished, "but at least I can understand. And, the more one knows, the more one believes."

"There's such a thing as knowing too much. Abysmal ignorance and superculture vie with each other in credulity. It's an age of superstition because it's an age of intensive education. To get down to common sense, there's little enough evidence connecting a descendant of Barsac de Rose with the original Belvoir, but there's nothing but Manning's word that the suit of armor he bought was ever owned by the Crimson Rambler. Proof that may have satisfied him wouldn't satisfy a normal and impartial judge. Manning simply read the legend in that old book, and his crazy imagination did the rest."

She reminded me that the specter had been seen by more than one in Manning's day.

"Yes," I retorted, "the way lots of people have seen the Indian rope trick. But a moving-picture machine exposed that humbug, because it isn't susceptible to mass suggestion or mass hypnotism. People here were keyed up to believe anything; and a red cow in the twilight, or some blend of color and light, became the Crimson Rambler. And so with this apparition of Mrs. Scunthorpe's, if she really claims to have seen anything."

"She swears she did. And cows aren't giving to roaming indoors. I'll tell you about it."

CHAPTER VII.

NO PLACE FOR A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

IT had happened, as Calory said the previous Sunday. Miss Alston was in the study on the ground floor with Mr. Scunthorpe, and Mr. Hungerford had gone to bed.

"Mr. Scunthorpe," she explained, "sent word that he wished to see me for a moment when his wife no longer needed me. Mrs. Scunthorpe went upstairs at ten, and she dismissed me at half past. Her rooms are off the regent's gallery which is on the second floor."

This gallery, like the original for which it was named, was one hundred and twenty-seven feet long; and Manning had also tried to imitate the original by filling it with tapestries and paintings and other "heirlooms" that he claimed were priceless. But when the estate came under the hammer, the "old masters" proved to be more or less valueless copies, and so, like much of the inventory, they were never sold. The gallery stood as it did in Manning's time, for Scunthorpe had restored the old armor, which he stuck here and there about the house, principally in the gallery and lower hall.

"He wished to see me," said Miss Alston, "about my experience in New York. It was the first opportunity he had had. He heard from Mr. Viner that——"

"That you'd been arrested? Yes, I know, though I don't understand exactly how Viner knew. Even Turnover says he doesn't. But I think perhaps that Captain Calory was at the bottom of it. Was Mr. Scunthorpe nasty about it?"

"Oh, not at all. He asked me a lot of questions, of course——"

"Principally about me, eh?"

"Well, naturally he was curious to learn how I happened to know you, why I hadn't said before that I did. But he believed what I told him, and that I no more knew Mr. Wrexham than he did. While we were talking we heard a dreadful shriek, and then Mrs. Scunthorpe burst into the room and fainted."

"People," I said, "who really have the power to conjure up spirits from the vasty deep don't receive them in that inhospitable manner."

"She had nothing to do with its appearance. It was the total unexpectedness of the thing. And there's a difference between faith and knowledge, believing and actually seeing."

It transpired that Mrs. Scunthorpe's intimacy with the alleged life beyond the veil was confined to such things as automatic writing and spirit photography, purely mechanical contrivances containing more than the usual margin of human error. She believed in materialization and her psychic ability, but, in spite of all her investigations and alleged experiences, she had never actually seen a sure-enough ghost until that night in the regent's gallery. So much she had confessed, on regaining consciousness, to her husband and Miss Alston. The experience had served to rid her, even if only temporarily, of much humbug.

She had left her room on some errand and was halfway down the long gallery when, though hearing and seeing nothing, she had the invincible feeling that some Thing was about to appear. Then the air suddenly grew cold, and the light became dim. She felt that the Thing had suddenly appeared behind her. Resisting a panic impulse to run, she turned and thought for a moment that a servant, in cleaning the place, had moved one of the suits of armor into the middle of the floor and forgotten to replace it. And then, in a flash of fear, she realized the impossibility of this comforting, if illogical, explanation. She realized that she herself had passed over that space but a few moments before.

"Did she notice," I asked, "if one of the suits of armor was missing from its usual place?"

No, she had eyes for nothing but the Thing that confronted her. It was perhaps ten yards off, and it had stopped when she turned. But, when

she took a backward step, it took two forward, slow, ponderous. Yet, though clad from head to heel in mail, and traversing a hardwood floor that had only a rug here and there, it made no sound.

"That was the rather horrible part," said Miss Alston. "It seemed to be palpable, yet impalpable—so real and yet unreal. It wasn't at all like Mrs. Scunthorpe's idea of a ghost. She said a wraith wouldn't have frightened her. But this Thing was what she says is known as an ab-human, something partaking of the nature of both worlds, and with a very real power to work harm. She doesn't know how she broke the spell, got the power to run headlong down the stairs. But when she reached the bottom, she couldn't resist the impulse to glance over her shoulder, and the Thing had vanished."

"What, exactly, does she mean by 'palpable, yet impalpable?' Simply because it moved without sound?"

No, there was more than that, though Mrs. Scunthorpe could not explain it very well. The armor, red with rust, seemed different, nebulous yet solid and opaque as other armor. And it gave off a faint crimson glow, an aura.

"A bad aura," said Miss Alston. "And the visor was down. Mrs. Scunthorpe said she wouldn't have felt quite so terrified if she had been able to see the Thing's face, no matter how horrific it might be. Of course, there is no fear like fear of the unknown. And then, to cap it all, it gave off a smell of corruption and decay. It sickened her."

Scunthorpe and Miss Alston had gone as soon as possible to the regent's gallery, mainly for the purpose of reassuring Mrs. Scunthorpe, and there they found Hungerford in his dressing gown. Scunthorpe charged his brother-in-law with playing a practical joke, and Hungerford denied it. Both men had grown quite heated over it.

Hungerford said he had been in bed when he heard the scream, and had come down quite naturally to learn the cause. Why should he play such a stupid joke? And how? Could he walk about in a suit of heavy armor without being heard all over the house, or could he appear from nowhere? Did he smell like the grave and shed a crimson light? Obviously his sister had had a waking nightmare or something. He knew it would come to this if she kept on with her crazy hobby.

Investigation had revealed nothing. There were no doors or windows tampered with, and the stands of armor in the lower hall and gallery were in their accustomed places. Nor were there any scores on the hardwood floor, such as mailed feet must be sure to leave. Of course, it being summer, more than the gallery windows were open on the second floor, and it should be a simple matter to force a screen; but one would need a ladder or extraordinary agility. Daylight revealed no footprints, nothing. And why should an intruder act in such an incomprehensible manner?

None of the servants had been aroused, and the trio went back to the study where Scunthorpe and his brother-in-law turned their irritation on Mrs. Scunthorpe. They cross-examined, and scolded, and ridiculed, until at length she was ready to agree that the whole thing must have been a figment of her imagination.

No doubt, she herself wished to believe this, and there was logic in what her husband said. She had got herself into a nice state with all this superstitious humbug. She had got hold of this old wives' tale, said Scunthorpe, and thought about it so much that she was beginning to see things. He would put his foot down on all this nonsense. He wasn't going to have the servants leaving, the place made a byword, as of old. He wasn't crazy like Manning.

Let there be an end of this Crimson Rambler piffle.

"And yet, from that night," concluded Miss Alston, "Skyrme and Stemmer take turns watching in the grounds. Why—if Mr. Scunthorpe thinks it all nonsense?"

"Well, there's his wife's rose diamond, and, I dare say, a few other trifles worth annexing. A burglar might find the old legend convenient. One of those suits of armor shouldn't make a bad hiding place. He could come in when opportunity offered and stand at attention until he saw his chance."

"But he could have robbed them that night."

"No, a woman's scream is fatal. Burglars will tell you that it, and a dog's bark are the worst deterrents to enterprise. But they'd rather have the dog."

"You seem to know a lot about it," commented Miss Alston. "So you think it was a burglar?"

"Who knows? But, if so, he may not have meant to scare Mrs. Scunthorpe; he may just have 'snapped out of it' too soon. He may have been making for her room when she turned and saw him. Which reminds me that you haven't told me yet where the rose diamond is hidden. Be neighborly, as Turnover would say."

"Which reminds me that I should be going," said Miss Alston, shaking the crumbs from her lap. "I'd no idea it was so late. They'll wonder where I've gone."

"Not for long, for it isn't only at night that Skyrme and Stemmer are on the job. One of them is watching us now."

"Where?" she demanded, peering among the trees.

"Oh, you can't see him, nor can I. But I'll bet good old Peeping Tom is there, just the same. They're very fond of me, can't bear to let me out of their sight. They'll be sure to report your visit, and I'm afraid it mayn't help you. Scunthorpe may think we're in cahoots, members of the same gang."

"What gang?"

"Why, the one responsible for Wrexham's murder, and all these sensational robberies. The papers say there's a master mind behind them, and I shouldn't be surprised if Captain Calory suspected that I knew who owned it. He may think you're my accomplice, planted at Belvoir to get inside information. These policemen get funny notions.

"You mustn't think that we've heard the last of the New York adventure, either. There's such a thing as the cat-and-mouse trick. The police are very fond of it, and they wouldn't put us on our guard by telling the press all they knew. If you haven't left enough evidence on the job, they give you every opportunity of supplying some on the next. They lull you into carelessness, and then pounce. So I'm warning you to watch your step. Don't pass out the rose diamond to your pal until you're sure a trap hasn't been laid for you."

"Thanks very much for the advice, Mr. Stone. It's truly good of you. But, if I may offer some of my own, why not give up this nefarious means of existence before it gives you up?"

"My dear child," I said, "how could I possibly make a living as an artist if I didn't do a little murder and robbery on the side? Why, you'd think pictures were necessities, like chewing gum or face powder! One must live."

"Well," she said, "there's no better way of disarming suspicion than by talking of one's guilt. I've an idea that, for all your nonsense, you're a rather clever sort of person, mine host."

The sun was beginning its trek across the Hudson, as I accompanied my guest to the South Road where,

saying that I might at least emulate the peri at the gates, we proceeded to climb the Hill. And, I added, as it was sure to be known that we had been together, we might as well be seen now. Then our talk turned to the Crimson Rambler, and I asked my companion if she subscribed to Turnover's opinion about Mrs. Scunthorpe being a neurotic.

"A neurotic temperament, yes," she said.

"What is Doctor Dugdale treating her for?"

"Money. Did you think it was love?"

I asked if it was simply a case of nerves, and there was really nothing wrong with Mrs. Scunthorpe, why Dugdale didn't advise her to leave Belvoir for a time.

"And kill the goose with the golden eggs?" laughed Miss Alston. "As you say, one must live. Besides, she wouldn't think of leaving. Does one lightly abandon the scene of one's greatest triumph?"

I gathered then the curious double effect of that experience in the regent's gallery. While apparently frightening Mrs. Scunthorpe almost out of her wits, it had also thrilled her with triumph, proving as it did all her cherished beliefs and theories.

"She's afraid, yet longs to see it again," said Miss Alston. "She agrees with her husband that it was all fancy, and she wants to believe that for her own comfort; yet in another, and perhaps stronger, sense, she doesn't. She'd love to have her husband and her brother see for themselves. Privately, she's intensely proud of her experience. I think she'll write a book about it. No, she wouldn't leave Belvoir for the world. It used to bore her a bit, but not now."

I suggested that if Mrs. Scunthorpe really was psychic, had the power to see what others could not, then she might see the spook a million times, the rest of the household never. But Miss Alston said this did not apply in the present case.

"This is a complete materialization, and therefore any one is capable of seeing it," she said. "The whole history of the Crimson Rambler proves it. It is ab-human, a spiritual manifestation of material forces. Material in the sense that it could harm one, though one could not harm it. Complete materializations are very rare."

"You seem to have delved deeply into these mysteries. As a mere ignorant skeptic, may I ask what causes its materialization? Why should our wandering boy suddenly take to wandering again?"

Mrs. Scunthorpe had explained that. The subject being taboo in the house, she had taken to discussing it privately with Miss Alston, the latter being paid to listen to what relatives would not. And I must say that, if one believed in such things, her explanation seemed logical enough.

While Barsac de Rose was in the flesh, any old wrong in any old place was enough to set him going; but after he was killed it took a powerful stimulant to resurrect him. His radius of activities was thus narrowed down, and it decreased still more with passing time. The economic muddle, which we call life, clarified somewhat through the centuries, and wrongs became neither so great nor so numerous. The under dog even declined at last to be hanged for stealing a sheep. Oppressors and exploiters and scoundrels still flourished, of course, as they will for the next thousand years or so; but, on the whole, there was a serious declension of Barsac's market. The law was steadily taking over a lot of his old jobs, making others impossible.

Moreover, there was the question of environment. Barsac, if Manning was to be credited, must have been for quite a period in the White Tower—a place that would cramp any one's style.

And, on the whole, the Tower of London stood for an attempt at organized justice. Then it ceased to be a fortress, palace, prison, while the neighborhood offered nothing in Barsac's line—nothing powerful enough to penetrate the fifteen-feet-thick walls of his Thames home.

"But, when Manning brought him out of cold storage, naturally he became more sensitive to outside influence?" I suggested.

"Yes. And so long as that influence was good, he wouldn't have materialized."

"You mean, then, that the influence of Belvoir isn't good? That's hardly complimentary to the worthy Scunthorpes."

"Oh, it has nothing to do with them," she replied. "Of course, the Crimson Rambler's radius of action, his susceptibility to influence, extends beyond Belvoir. We don't know just how far it may extend. And what if it was Manning himself who was responsible for its materialization? Mrs. Scunthorpe thinks so."

It was an ingenious argument, hammered out from all the local tales about Manning. He had got his wealth by some nefarious means, and, though he had eluded his victims, he had not escaped the amorphous righter of wrongs he had brought to Belvoir.

"When he saw that Manning was going to escape all human retribution, Barsac de Rose took the field," said Miss Alston. "In other words, the sense of frustration of mundane justice became strong enough to materialize him. It was this, not any human enemy, that Manning tried to escape at the last. Who knows that he really committed suicide? There was a question at the time, I believe."

I could not deny this. Turnover had spoken of it. The medical examiner had declared it suicide, not merely because of Manning's rumored insanity, but because of the utter lack of proof that his death could have been caused by any but himself.

"And what of poor Harrington?" I asked. "Did it kill him, too? I'm sure Mrs. Scunthorpe must have an explanation."

Yes, she had, admirable woman. In all likelihood if the dead Harrington's past were sifted, it would bring to light some cruel wrong that had escaped human justice and the light of publicity.

"Well," I said, as we came in sight of the great scrolled gates of Belvoir, "what it all seems to come to is this: There's some influence around here, some hidden malefactor, that has got the old boy in the tin union suit up and prancing. Between him and Captain Calory, it's no place for a guilty conscience."

"I quite agree," said Miss Alston. "When are you thinking of leaving?"

To be continued next week.

TAKING HIS TIME

WHITTAKER RAY, the New York theatrical producer, was trying to convey an adequate idea of the stinginess of a man whom he described as the worst tightwad this side of Singapore.

"When it's his time to stand treat," said Ray, "the way he reaches for his pocketbook makes a slow-motion picture of a Scotchman getting ready to decide to invite a crowd of forty to have another drink, look like an acute attack of St. Vitus' dance."

An Amazon of Sonora

By Ernest Douglas

Author of "The Jonah Leg," Etc.

Joe Bonner's wooden leg gets him into a new wild experience in the mountains of Mexico, an experience involving bandits and a señorita.

A COMPLETE STORY

WE had no business whatever to go tearing off down the Sonora River Valley. Our word had been given to the governor that we would take a little *paseo* out in another direction from Hermosillo, to the Horcasitas country, and see if we couldn't pick up some information that would aid in running to earth a certain outlaw band led by a young daredevil named Fortino Gandaro. But Joe Bonner was unable to ignore the pleas of a lady in distress who pined away for a wooden leg.

That letter from Señora Guadalupe de Orantia—better known as "La Amazona," for reasons that ultimately were made clear to us—arrived when we were all ready to pull out the following day on the governor's mission. It completely upset the program.

Because we had accidentally performed one valued service for the governor of Sonora, he took a great fancy to Joe and me. We had been informally attached to his staff as "advisers," with the understanding that if we ever spotted any attractive business or mining proposition he would lend his influence to clear away the obstacles so often raised by Mexican officialdom to thwart ambitious Americans.

Now he had asked us to go scouting after Gandaro and his *ladrones,* who specialized in driving off cattle and smuggling them across the international line. He thought that as wandering gringo prospectors we would be free

from suspicion and might get the low-down on certain parties who were suspected of being in league with the outlaws. My opinion was that we would more likely get killed or held for ransom; but as the depredations were really serious and our friend's administration was being severely criticized for its failure to cope with the situation, we could not well refuse his request.

Then that woman had to write Joe and beg that he come to her hacienda and measure her for a wooden leg like his own oh-so-wonderful limb about which she had heard so much. Most of her cowards of servants had fled in fear of the Yaquis who, she solemnly averred, had not been seen in that part of Sonora since the current Indian outbreak began. Anyway, she was left so short-handed that it was impossible for her to leave the ranch long enough for a trip to the State capital; but if the gallant Señor Bonner and his *compañero,* Señor Wayland, would condescend to visit her poor house it should be our house, and so on and so on. If Señor Bonner could assist in alleviating her unfortunate condition she would not only be eternally grateful but would pay handsomely for the service as well.

Having never heard of Señor de Orantia, Joe took the note to old Martinez, our landlord at the Hotel Moderno, and asked him about it.

"Ah, you are fortunate indeed to be invited to the hacienda of La Amazona," smiled Martinez. "She is a very gracious and hospitable hostess, I hear —at least as long as her uncertain temper is sweet. But her father was an American and she likes all Yankees.

"She is a wealthy widow and manages a large estate very capably. Last year she was injured in a fight with a vicious bull and one leg had to be amputated. It was very sad. The bull died.

"Yes, you should enjoy yourselves immensely under her roof. Her daughter, an only child, is one of the loveliest girls in all Mexico and——"

But Joe was not waiting to hear any more. He was bounding back upstairs to our room to dig up a sheaf of catalogues and instruction sheets from the company that manufactured the right leg which he wore in place of the original he lost at St. Mihiel.

Joe took delight in helping cripples to reëquip themselves with limbs, even at his own expense; and this looked like the most interesting commission of that nature that had yet come his way.

"Just think of it!" he crowed, pounding me on the back so heavily that my teeth rattled. "Rich widow wants me to fit her out with a wooden leg. Only child is the prettiest señorita below the border. You betcha! We'll enjoy ourselves plenty at Mrs. de Orantia's. Say, Pete, run out and ask somebody which way we go, and how far it is."

Although I found out that it meant we would go west instead of northeast, and into territory where there was more or less danger of encountering hostile Yaquis, I did not raise any serious objection to this shift in plans. My conscience hurt me a little, but I hadn't lost any bandits.

So, at daylight the next morning, we rode out of Tomas Romero's corral on a pair of long-geared ponies, each of us with a blanket roll and a little food and a prospecting pick tied on behind his saddle. With the rose-pink dawn at our backs we crossed the sandy river bottom below town and passed through a collection of mud hovels called Villa Seris. From there we traveled briskly down the river. As we trotted along we speculated on what sort of a fit the governor would throw when he found out—as he doubtless would—about our unauthorized change of objective.

The farther we pulled away from Hermosillo, the more desolate and lonely became the country. Back from the river were the cruel gray hills, jeal-

ously frowning upon the fringes of green along the banks of the stream. The occasional ranches were almost deserted, the mines entirely so, for Chief Luis Mátuz and his braves were on the warpath and every one who could do so had sought safety in more settled regions.

From the description that we had obtained in town, we knew that certain wide, lush fields which we approached toward evening of the second day were those of La Amazona. Steers grazed knee-deep in alfalfa beyond hedges of prickly pear cactus. There were patches of corn and barley, a vineyard where a ragged boy was filling a basket with purple grapes, an orange grove where last winter's yellow fruit still hung. The prospect was certainly pleasing, even if the irrigation ditches were weedy, the gates ramshackle and the trees in need of pruning.

The house was the usual whitewashed, flat-roofed adobe quadrangle at the far end of a driveway overhung by enormous *guamoche* trees. I was dismounting to open the gate when a peon came tearing out to perform the service for us, his rawhide sandals flopping against the gravel.

Señora de Orantia, a crutch under her left arm, met us at the door with a hearty, "Welcome to you, my very kind friends." She spoke English haltingly and immediately dropped into Spanish when assured that both of us were familiar with that tongue.

Sipping wine in the cool, flower-grown patio, while Joe and our hostess proceeded to get as chummy as a couple of woolly pups, I had plenty of time to size up La Amazona. I was not sure that I liked her, but she interested me as no other woman I had met in Mexico.

Physically she was massive, almost as tall as Joe and twice as broad. Not fat, but big; I did not wonder that the bull which rashly attacked her had died. A sort of black smock failed to conceal her ample proportions. The forearms were like hams, the fingers were like small clubs. They bore no rings, and there were not even earrings to set off the swart, flat, slightly greasy but still animated features. Dark-brown eyes snapped as she denounced her timid employees who had flocked into Hermosillo at the first hint of Yaqui trouble, leaving her to manage with a force of three or four aged mozos and two cowboys.

Suddenly she broke off to address the serving woman who was refilling our glasses.

"What has become of Eugenia?" she demanded.

"She has gone to dress, señora," was the reply.

"To dress!" frowned the unadorned Amazona. "That child thinks of nothing but clothes. Clothes and——"

Something that at first sight reminded one of a butterfly floated from behind a screen of vines. It was some one in beribboned white satin, embroidered mauve shawl and red slippers—a costume patently designed for the ballroom and not for the patio. Señora de Orantia beckoned commandingly and, not without some pride in her tone, presented "my little daughter."

Eugenia de Orantia was indeed a little girl, but not exactly the child that her mother seemed to think. She was perhaps sixteen, which can be old in tropical America. Slim and fragile she was, in marked contrast to the gigantic and mannish *mamá*. The prettily arranged long hair was dark, but the delicate face was almost Anglo-Saxon in its fairness. Either because of innate good sense or maternal interdiction, she had not smeared her cheeks with glycerine and powder and rouge in the accepted Mexican fashion. The result was a vision of youthful beauty and freshness. Indeed, Eugenia was "one of the loveliest girls in all Mexico."

Joe bowed over her hand a great deal;

longer than was necessary or strictly polite, gazing deep into long-lashed, liquid eyes that were telling him I knew not what. La Amazona apparently failed to sense the fire that was kindling right under her nose.

"Now, daughter, run along and tell Raquel to lay covers for four, and to take care not to scorch the *enchiladas* again.

"We shall dine in an hour, señores. A thousand pardons for having detained you so long with my gossip. I should have shown you to your quarters long ago, for you must be weary from your journey."

The señora herself, lurching along on her crutch, led the way to spotlessly clean rooms, with connecting door, where our scant baggage had been deposited.

Joe whistled abstractedly as we cleaned up and shaved for *comida*.

"Surely an unusual character, La Amazona," I hazarded.

"An unusual ogress, you mean. Regular old she-devil."

"Why, I thought she made a big hit with you. Surely looked that way."

"I thought at first that I was going to like her a lot; but—didn't you see the imploring look that poor little kid gave us?"

"She didn't look at me at all."

"Well, you're blinder than a pickled bat if you can't see that something's wrong around here. Eugenia is scared to death of her mother. Makes me think of a white dove caged with a rattlesnake. Anyway, it's a crime against civilization to keep a beauty like her penned up away out here next to the jumping-off place. If I——"

"Off again, Sir Galahad! Galloping to the rescue of another maiden in distress. You've got to show me where your 'white dove' is being abused. You'll admit that she wears some gorgeous feathers."

Joe snorted something about "unsympathetic barbarians" as he hoed viciously at his whiskers. That job finished, he unrolled his blanket and produced canvas slippers, a gray silk shirt and flannel trousers, the latter somewhat wrinkled but still presentable.

"Hey, what's the idea of the college-boy harness?" I yelped. "Thought we agreed to travel light, with no clothes except what we stood in."

"That was when we were going to take Gandaro's trail. You knew we were headed for a house party, so don't blame me if you didn't come prepared or if Eugenia prefers a polished gentleman to a roughneck."

Not caring what impression I made upon Joe's caged bird, I boldly stalked out in my dusty khaki outfit. No one seemed to notice, and we had a pleasant meal under the sapote trees in the patio.

Eugenia, much to Joe's disappointment, was seated next to me. I found her timid and unattentive; her eyes constantly strayed to my partner. After three or four attempts at starting a conversation, and eliciting incredibly inane replies, I decided that she was even more dumb than beautiful and gave ear to the more entertaining chatter of La Amazona.

Later we tipped back our chairs and smoked. Eugenia, at a nod from her mother, brought a guitar and sang old, old Spanish songs in a sweet, thin voice.

Joe's applause took the form of fulsome praise that seemed to amuse Señora de Orantia.

"Yes, my baby sings fairly well. Now about that matter of a wooden leg——"

Before the evening was over, Joe had taken La Amazona's measure, with the daughter and myself as interested spectators at the operation. She was unable to decide, however, which of several types she would order.

"But there is no hurry about that, is there?" she inquired. "For you are

going to be my guests for several days and that will give me time to make up my mind."

All of which suited Joe exactly, but I was not so well pleased. Several days would also give him time to become involved in some ridiculous affair with Eugenia. We would be just as safe, I thought, hunting cattle rustlers for the governor.

The next morning we were invited to accompany La Amazona on a horseback tour of the estate. I accepted immediately, but Joe, for the first time in his life, claimed to be tired. Two long days of steady riding were too much for a wooden-legged man, he said. If the señora did not mind he would remain at the *casa* and rest.

So I rode off through the fields with La Amazona and her two *vaqueros,* Reynaldo and Jorge. In khaki trousers and shirt she bulked more huge and masculine than ever. She bestrode a roan that was big and raw-boned, yet not overly large to support her weight. At the left side of her saddle was a rifle in a scabbard; her crutch was lashed on the right.

The widow proved unexpectedly entertaining and took delight in explaining everything to one who was really interested in her property. There were so many things to see and learn that I forgot my vague anxiety regarding impressionable, soft-hearted old Joe. That designing minx, Eugenia, would be under the watchful eye of the *criada,* Raquel; so why worry?

At noon we ate cold tortillas and jerky under a mesquite tree, then set about transferring a drove of cattle from one pasture to another.

I chanced to be the first to spy a yellowish-gray shape loping over a hill at least two hundred yards to our right.

"Coyote," I remarked.

La Amazona's rifle was out of its scabbard in an instant. It came up to her shoulder. Apparently she took no aim, but it spat once into the bright afternoon sunshine.

The desert wolf dropped in its tracks. It rolled down the slope a few feet, then lay still.

"What a lucky shot!" I exclaimed in amazement. "I'll wager you couldn't do that again."

"But she could, and very easily," laughed Jorge, a leathery old cowpuncher. "If you will go and examine that coyote, you will find its neck broken."

Although I did not believe him for a minute, out of curiosity I did cross and inspect the carcass. Sure enough, the brute's spine had been severed just behind the ears.

The señora accepted my awe-struck compliments with apparent indifference. Later I happened to be alone with Jorge and he told me some astonishing stories of her marksmanship.

"She shoots so straight that the Yaquis do not dare come near the Hacienda de Orantia," he boasted. "I know that, so I am not afraid like those rats who ran away."

That evening I was all primed to relate the incident to Joe, but he never gave me a chance. He was running over with news about Eugenia. It was just as he suspected; that tender flower was being crushed and frightfully mistreated by her dragon of a mother, and if I had any manhood about me I'd help him to spirit the persecuted victim away from there.

I never did get it quite clear in my head as to the nature of the brutality to which Eugenia was subjected. It appeared, though, that her unnatural ma persisted in treating her as a mere infant when it was quite plain that she was a grown woman and fully capable of choosing a husband for herself. La Amazona had frowned sternly upon the attentions of suitors and even took a pot shot at one swain who came twanging a guitar and warbling love ditties

around the premises by night. That had frightened them all away, and since then Eugenia had been wholly without masculine society.

The point upon which Joe laid most stress, however, was the señora's point-blank refusal to send her daughter into Hermosillo and safety; she kept her a virtual prisoner right there on the ranch, where she was in mortal terror of Yaquis.

"Forget it," I advised when it was possible to get a word in edgewise. "The only reason that flapper wants to get into the city is because she has boy on the brain. You just let her alone. If you don't you'll have the Amazon gunning for you. And Lord! how that woman can shoot!"

Eugenia ate with us again under the sapotes and we had another pleasant evening. But the girl did not appear at breakfast the following day.

While Joe was looking around for her, Señora de Orantia came bluntly to the point.

"I must apologize to you for the shameless conduct of my silly daughter, Señor Bonner."

"Apologize?" Joe was mystified as well as startled. "For what?"

"Raquel told me about her scandalous behavior of yesterday, how she hung around you and gave you no peace. Eugenia is a sore trial to me, my friends. You, as Americans, will understand that a child of sixteen really ought to be in the nursery. But I have allowed her too much freedom and now she disgraces me. She is foolishly romantic, señores. She throws herself at every man who comes along. Too young to know the meaning of the word, she is in love with love.

"I solemnly warned her not to annoy you. I pointed out that you are twice her age and could only be bored by her infant's prattle. It seems to have done no good; but I promise that she shall not annoy you again."

"What—what have you done?" faltered Joe.

"Oh, I had one of the mozos take her over to a neighbor's home this morning, with orders to keep her there until I send for her. But let us not speak of my troubles any more. Would you care to ride with me over my hacienda to-day?"

Joe, in a sort of daze, assented. Before we got started he tried to bribe Raquel to tell him where Eugenia had been sent, but she professed ignorance.

The day passed without incident except that, at my request, La Amazona gave another exhibition of her uncanny skill with the rifle. Several jack rabbits and an armadillo paid the penalty. Whether Joe was duly impressed I could not tell.

A surprise awaited us upon our return to the *casa*. A military messenger had just arrived and he handed over a letter addressed to the two of us jointly.

It was a frigidly polite note from the governor, the politeness ineffectually masking furious anger. He desired to know whether Señor Bonner and Señor Wayland could explain their unexplainable action in directly disobeying his instructions and disregarding their pledge. Could he have been wrong in ignoring the warnings of his counselors that no Americans were to be trusted?

It had come to his knowledge that we had not gone to Horcasitas at all but had last been seen a day's ride west of Hermosillo. And right now was the time when we might be of real service in the bandit country. For Gandaro and his band had been lying low for more than a week and information was at hand that they planned a new raid on a bigger scale than ever.

"May I have your answer soon?" requested the messenger. "His excellency gave instructions that I return to the palace as soon as I could overtake you."

"There is no answer," Joe growled.

"Just tell the governor that we know what we're doing."

"Do we?" I sniffed, as the soldier galloped off with a cynical laugh and a wave of his hand. "If *you* do, tell me.

"Our beautiful stand-in that was going to put us in the way of making a million dollars is all shot to pieces now. It'll be a firing squad and an adobe wall for us if we ever show up in Hermosillo again. Best thing we can do is to hit for the Gulf of California and climb aboard the first ship that comes along."

Joe was as gloomy as a double funeral when we gathered for the evening meal. The señora evidently did not notice but rattled on as usual until Raquel's little boy came in crying that there was a big fire off to the northwest.

We all ran outside to look. A bright column of flame, obviously several miles off, gleamed through the gathering dusk.

"Listen!" commanded La Amazona in strangely quavering tones.

To our straining ears came faint pops that could be nothing but gunfire.

Guadalupe de Orantia swayed on her crutch, slumped down on the ground. Her face was a ghastly, sickly gray, her eyes glassy with horror.

"The Yaquis!" she moaned. "They're at Cordova's. The horse ranch across the river."

"Too bad," I rejoined vacuously. "Do you think they'll come here?"

"Eugenia! That is where I sent her. Heaven forgive me!"

"What?" howled Joe, his ruddy cheeks blanching. "My—your Eugenia at the mercy of those red devils? And you sent her there! You're responsible for her murder—if nothing worse. I hope that's all."

"So do I!" whimpered the stricken mother. "My darling! My tender little lamb. Why did I not keep her here under my protection? The Yaquis will never come here—they have learned to fear La Amazona."

"Why didn't you make sure she was annoying me before you packed her off? You've been taking a lot on yourself, woman——"

"Silence, gringo! Who are you to question me?"

Señora de Orantia bounced up on her one leg and confronted Joe with eyes that cast forth brimstone. Her mouth was open to heap denunciations upon his fiery head; then she decided that there was something else more important.

"Jorge! Reynaldo! The horses, at once! Get your guns and all the cartridges you have. We go to rescue Eugenia from the Yaquis."

"Us, too!" yelled Joe, dashing for the corral.

Within five minutes we had splashed across the river at a swift gallop and were climbing the opposite bank. La Amazona led the way, never once looking back.

I asked Jorge how far it might be to the Cordova place.

"About six kilometers," he replied.

When we had covered about half that distance, La Amazona yanked her roan to its haunches. Out of the night raced a lone horseman who shrieked that he was Carlos. I recognized an old gardener whom I had seen several times prior to Eugenia's banishment.

His story was gasped out quickly. The Yaquis had swept down from the mountains in the north about five o'clock in the afternoon. Cordova and all his men were taken by surprise and shot; the women and children were rounded up but all were spared except Eugenia, who had been carried away by the chief, screeching and clawing in the saddle before him.

When they left, headed back into the mountains, the Indians drove away at least a hundred of Cordova's horses. Carlos himself had escaped by hiding. As soon as he dared emerge from concealment he had fired a haystack and

emptied a gun to attract our attention, then caught a horse and pelted for home.

So the shooting we had heard was his alarm, after the fighting was all over. The Yaquis must have at least two hours' start on us.

"How many are in their party?" questioned Señora de Orantia.

"Oh, a great army. Thirty, perhaps. Maybe fifty."

"Fool! How many did you actually see?"

"Seven, I think," Carlos admitted, after a moment's calculation.

"That's more likely. Jorge and Reynaldo, you are equal to at least one Yaqui apiece. Our two gringos are equal to one. I am equal to four. That makes it even. Forward!"

It was pitch black by this time, but a brilliant moon soon poked its edge above the horizon. This made it less difficult for Joe and me to keep up with the three rough riders in front. Carlos, if he followed at all, was soon left far astern.

Across a cornfield drifted the eerie wailing of the widows and orphans bereft by the pitiless *bravos*. La Amazona swung north to skirt the Cordova line fence. She stopped eventually at an open gate. Jorge and Reynaldo dismounted to examine the ground.

"Yes, they drove the horses out here."

"Can we hold the trail in the night?"

"I think so. The herd is a large one and the moonlight is bright."

"In the old days the Yaquis used to drive stolen stock into El Rincon," suggested Reynaldo. "We might go directly there and——"

"These will not do that," interrupted La Amazona. "That place is too well known now. They will seek some other retreat."

Northward we bored into the night, first over a sagebrush flat and then through rolling foothills covered with a thousand varieties of cacti, each thornier than the others. The *vaqueros* were in the lead. Sometimes they had to get down, strike matches and scout around on foot; but always they rediscovered the tracks without much loss of time.

"I believe they are indeed driving for El Rincon," insisted Reynaldo. "See? The entrance is just to the left of that middle peak, right the way we are pointed."

Señora de Orantia said nothing. Indeed, she scarcely spoke that night except to mumble prayers and drop a few fervent Mexican curses on the fate that had deprived her of a leg she must have missed sadly on that helter-skelter chase up toward the Sierra Pinta.

Even conversational Joe Bonner was silenced for once. His teeth, like mine, were chattering. He had come away from the hacienda in his silk shirt and flannel pants, and I was not clad much more warmly. Any one who thinks that Mexico is a hot country never did any night riding in the highlands of Sonora.

In my misery I could only hang on and pray for daylight to dispel the arctic chill. When it did come it brought not only warmth but also more danger and excitement, crowded into one brief hour, than I had experienced since—well, since the last scrape Joe had dragged me into.

I awakened from a sort of stupor to hear the señora saying:

"You were right after all. They are going into El Rincon to rest. They must have little fear of pursuit or they would choose a place more easily defended. Perhaps they do not know that it is La Amazona's daughter they have captured."

We were proceeding at a more moderate pace up a crooked arroyo bordered by rocky knobs and thickets of chaparral.

"Careful," cautioned La Amazona.

"They surely have a sentry in the pass."

Jorge threw up a hand and we all stopped. He slid from his horse and crept forward to peer around a jutting point.

"The sentry is there, and in plain view," he reported with a troubled frown. "But he is too far away to be hit from here, and there is no more cover so we cannot get nearer without being seen."

"How far?" asked La Amazona, whose face was pallid in the morning light.

"Much more than half a kilometer, señora."

"Not too far for *my* rifle. Not when the life of my *niña* is at stake."

She jumped off and hobbled ahead on her crutch, clutching her rifle. Joe and I, burning with curiosity and anxiety, moved cautiously in her wake while the Mexicans held the horses.

La Amazona threw herself prone and began inching along like some great, awkward worm. We sidled up the slope and peeped over a rib of granite while she hissed a warning to keep our heads down.

This was the head of the arroyo, where several shallow gullies came together. Ahead was a sharply rising ridge where only a few sparse bushes and chollas grew. At the crest, in a wide dip between two pointed hills, was a motionless horseman. Jorge had not overestimated the distance, which was more than a quarter of a mile.

"Never do it," muttered Joe. "Shots like that are made only by sharpshooters with special sights and wind gauges and range finders and all them jiggers."

"Who's pessimist now? I'm betting on La Amazona."

"If she shoots the others will hear it, and all the beans will be spilled. No chance then for a surprise attack."

This same possibility occurred to our sniper. She went scuttling back down the dash, crossed over and came up on the other side. There she ducked into a cave in the granite. The cavity did not look to be of any extent, but in a moment the señora disappeared.

"Now what?" wondered Joe.

Several long and tense minutes passed. The sentinel leisurely got down off his horse and seemed to be rolling a cigarette. He threw back his arms and, so clear was the air or so vivid my imagination, that I seemed to see him yawn.

Then he sat down on a boulder, allowing his pony to stand with dragging reins. He stretched out and pulled his sombrero over his eyes, no doubt weary after his strenuous night.

From the cave sounded a peculiar, muffled roar.

La Amazona had fired. The recesses of the cavern had acted as a natural silencer, absorbing so much of the report that it could not have been audible more than a hundred yards away, if that.

The Yaqui still lay on his flat rock, his posture unchanged.

"Come on," called La Amazona, scrambling out.

"Say, how do you know you hit that fellow?" queried Joe. "He just didn't hear—that's the only reason he's not up yelling for help."

"He's dead. Don't waste time, gringo."

We pushed the horses up the declivity for all they were worth. Every minute I expected to see the Indian rise and get into action, but he never stirred. His pony raised its head just once to neigh at our beasts, then paid no more attention.

Joe and I followed the example of the others and tied our mounts to some bushes just under the summit. All of us advanced warily, well to one side of the victim of La Amazona's deadly aim. Soon we were gazing over into El Rincon.

It was a little valley perhaps a mile

long from north to south, and nearly as wide. Most of its bottom was covered with a low growth of mesquite and other small trees among which horses were browsing. Toward the northwest corner was a tiny adobe cabin of two rooms, with smoke curling from its chimney. Near by was a corral in which several saddle horses were confined.

"There are only two ways into El Rincon," stated La Amazona, addressing us collectively. "The other is at the farther end of the valley. Another may be posted there, but we do not have to worry about him if we can get over this ridge and into the brush without being seen.

"We must be better Indians than the Yaquis, my friends. We must be more stealthy and tireless stalkers than they. One of us walks on a crutch and the other on a wooden leg, which will make our progress very slow; but we have too little strength to leave any of it behind.

"It might be better to wait until night and lay an ambush when they leave. But they may not leave—and there is another reason why we must hurry."

She clung to her rifle but Jorge insisted on carrying her crutch until the crawling and creeping on all fours was over. We took advantage of every stone and cactus, thankful that the distance was so great we could risk a little noise.

Once down in the scrub the going was easier, although not much faster. There were not so many cactus spines to spear our hands and knees and shins, and sometimes the trees were tall enough for us to walk upright. Our right of way was challenged only once, and that by a whirring rattlesnake that changed its mind and slithered off into a badger hole.

We exchanged scarcely a word, for all of us well understood that the object was to surround that adobe shack or at least to command all its exits. My shirt was dripping perspiration, but I was in much better case than Joe, of whose fancy raiment only a few shreds remained.

"I never heard of such careless Yaquis," marveled La Amazona in one of our pauses. "They must think that there is no one left in the valley to pursue them. I believe they're all asleep."

At last we were within easy range of the house, but still well hidden by the thicket. Señora de Orantia whispered something to Jorge and Reynaldo, who kept on while she knelt behind a crucifixion thorn bush and motioned to us to station ourselves.

"Do not shoot until I give the word," she instructed, and we never once thought of questioning the leadership of that astonishing woman.

We were facing a closed doorway of rough-hewn planks. On either side was a window, very high up under the flat roof of brush and dried mud.

"Señor Wayland will take the left window, Señor Bonner the right. I will take the door. Be sure to keep your fire high, for Eugenia is in there and she must not be harmed.

"Now!"

A fusillade of lead poured through those windows and the upper three inches of the door. The *vaqueros,* off to our right, added their quota to the hail of bullets that must have created consternation inside those earthen walls.

"Enough!" barked La Amazona, and the firing ceased.

There must have been another door on the north side, for out darted a human figure manifestly bound for the gate of the pole corral where the saddle horses were kept. Five rifles belched at once. The runner rolled over and over, clawed at the ground, did not arise.

"Let them have it once more."

Again our weapons crackled for the better part of a minute. A board fell

out of the door. La Amazona plowed up the earth right in front with one bullet, just to show what she could do if she chose.

Seconds ticked by. From one of the windows was thrust a stick with a white handkerchief on the end.

"Come out, one at a time. Leave your guns behind."

A Yaqui emerged hesitantly. Jorge and Reynaldo promptly appeared, searched him for arms and stood him up with his hands above his head.

Three more came out and were similarly handled.

"Bring me my daughter," boomed La Amazona. "And if you have harmed her——"

A tall, swarthy, mustachioed young chap stepped through the doorway. His right arm was thrown protectingly about Eugenia and her slight form was drawn close against him.

Cr-r-rack!

La Amazona's gun had spoken once more. Its vengeful messenger of death, dispatched in hate and loathing, sped straight to the insurrecto chieftain's heart.

He sagged over against Eugenia. She supported him for a moment, then he wilted and dropped with a thud.

Screaming out in horror, Eugenia de Orantia cast herself prone upon the dead body of her captor. She pressed her lips to his, moaned and shrieked out anguish unspeakable.

It was her mother who took her by the arm and gently pulled her away.

"Niña! Niña mia! You are overwrought. The cruel Indian who carried you away is dead. *Mamá* has killed him, so you have nothing to fear now."

"Murderess! You have slain my lover. Oh, such treachery!"

"Your lover? Daughter, you do not know what you say. This is the Yaqui who——"

"Yaqui? No! This is the valiant Mexican captain, Fortino Gandaro. A patriot who fought for the freedom of his people, he was called a bandit——"

"Gandaro! He is not a Yaqui! Those other coyotes do not look like Yaquis. How long have you known that outlaw?"

"Since last night. Oh, he was so brave, so fearless, so gallant. He won my heart. *Mamá,* you do not know what you have done to me. I shall never forgive you."

"But I will," comforted Joe Bonner, patting La Amazona's muscular shoulder. "Señora, that wooden leg you need so badly is not going to cost you a cent. It's going to be a present from the governor of Sonora, a little token of appreciation for services rendered."

More stories by Ernest Douglas will appear in future issues of this magazine.

IMMUNE TO PUNISHMENT

MEMBERS of the Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate discovered in striking fashion, during the public hearings on labor injunction bills, how tremendous and powerful mere words can be made to sound when deep and anguished bitterness is the hammer that strikes them from the human tongue.

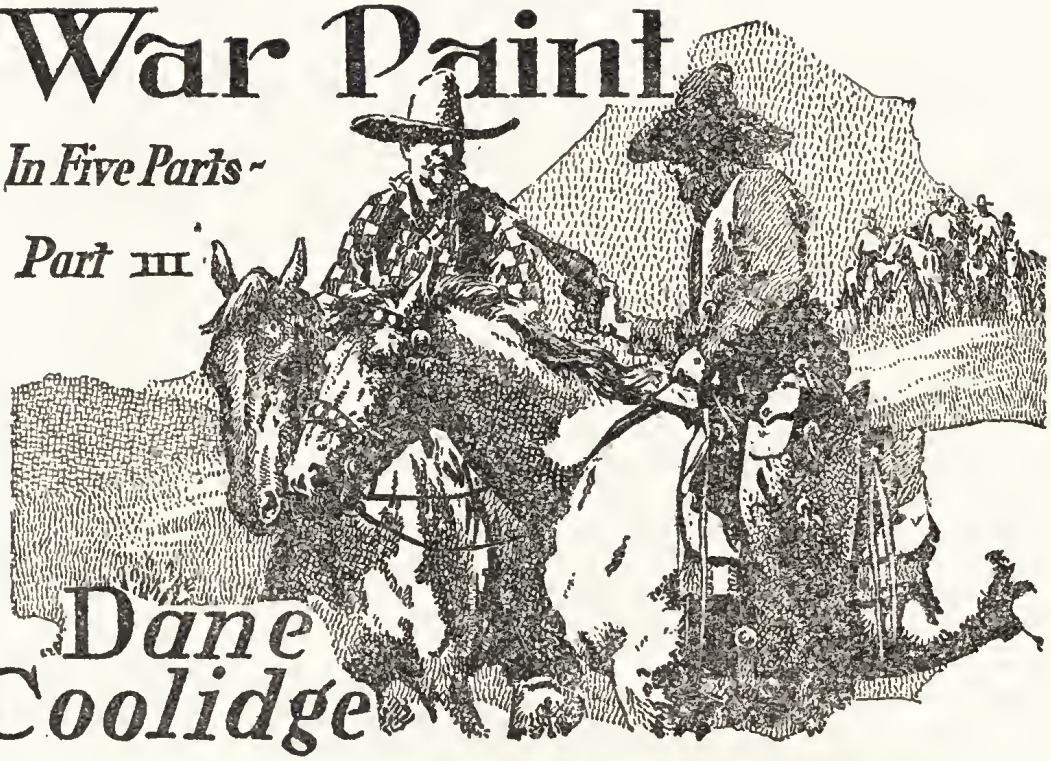
The speaker was Andrew Furuseth. In the course of his remarks he said:

"They told me they were going to send me to jail for violating a labor injunction. I told them: 'Personally, it means nothing to me. You can't give me any coarser food than I have been accustomed to, you can't put me in any cell smaller than the fo'c's'les where I have spent my life, you can't make me any lonelier than I am now; so put me where you want to, gentlemen, and God bless you!'"

War Paint

In Five Parts—

Part III



Dane Coolidge

Author of "Gun Smoke," Etc.

"Curly" Wells rode in Ganada Crossing to find a stolen horse, and claimed it from the herd there. But as he was riding off, after a barely averted conflict with "Tuffy" Malone, a gun fighter, he was followed by a gray cayuse. Its owner, Melissa McCoy, overtook him, demanding the return of her animal. He promised to take it to her corral, but, while doing so, met Colonel Moore, a neighbor of hers, who invited him to supper. Curly learned that Tuffy had been annoying Melissa, and that she had lost other horses. Next morning his own horse was gone again, and the evidence pointed to Tuffy. Curly finally located it at Mike Broiles', and in getting it back was almost killed by that rustler's assassins. Wounded, he was cared for by Melissa and her father, "Honey" McCoy, a bee farmer. A sentimental quarrel made him leave, and he was persuaded by Johnson and Moore to undertake the recovery of stock stolen by Tuffy and his crowd, of which Mike was one.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MAN OF PEACE.

IT was evening at Ganado Crossing and the lonely horse wrangler had corralled his herd for the night. The times were perilous now, for no longer in front of the store gamboled the warriors of "Hard Winter" Johnson. Where "Tuffy" Malone and his rollicking fellowship shot at tin cans for the drinks, one man stood waiting in the doorway of the bar when "Curly" Wells rode back. Gone forever and turned outlaw were the lanky Texas gunmen who had cut the trail herds of yore; and in their place, smiling affably, stood "Handsome Harry" Vail, a black pipe clenched tightly between his teeth.

"Good evening, Uncle Henry," he greeted politely. "Howdy do, Mr. Wells, howdy do!"

He shook hands perfunctorily, his pale face strained and set as he sensed some new setback to his schemes; but Johnson did not beat around the bush.

"Mr. Wells is our new range boss," he announced, "and he'll take his orders from me."

For a moment the black eyes of

Handsome Harry dilated and he bit down hard on his pipe. Then he smiled, with a mocking bow.

"Fine and dandy," he said. "We sure need some cowboys." But Curly could see he was sore.

"Mr. Wells," went on Hard Winter, "will hire and fire his own hands and have full charge of the work on the range. I've got to build up an outfit, Harry, or them boys will steal me blind. Have you heard about Tuffy Malone?"

"No!" answered Harry, cocking his head expectantly; and Curly watched him grimly.

"He done stole three thousand steers, right off my lower range. And he's started with the herd for Arizona."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Harry eagerly. "Is Mr. Wells going after 'em?"

"Well, not so you'd notice it," returned Curly. "He's got all those Heel Flies with him."

"Oh, I see," grinned Harry in sudden good humor. "And you don't care, under the circumstances, to buy in on that game? I can't say, Mr. Wells, that I blame you."

"Nope," responded Curly. "I'm a man of peace, Mr. Vail. I'm not hired for a gun slinger but to brand and work these cattle. That's an officer's job—catching cow thieves."

"Well, well," murmured Harry, looking him over appraisingly while his lip curled up in a smile. "Seems to me I heard somewhere you were a stock detective, sent out here by the Panhandle cattlemen."

"Very likely," answered Curly. "You hear all kinds of things. But as long as those rounders leave our outfit alone——"

"I—I—see," nodded Vail, "and I reckon you're wise. Come in, and I'll buy you a drink."

"Don't care if I do," assented Curly cheerfully. But Hard Winter gazed at him dourly.

"Don't git started like them others, now," he warned. "I'm beginning all over again and I want to begin right. You're not hired to belly up to that bar."

"Won't you join us, Uncle Henry," begged Harry teasingly. "It's on me and not on the house. You've had a hard ride and you need a little snort, just to cut the alkali dust."

"Nope, nope," declined Hard Winter. "Hard liquor and idle living has been the ruination of my hands. They hung around the store ontil their bar bills et 'em up and then they threw in with the wild bunch. But I never thought those boys would rob me like that." And he reined away with a sigh.

"Old man is feeling bad," observed Handsome Harry lightly, as he led the way into the bar. "But I'll tell you, Mr. Wells, I'm sure glad you've come. Kind of lonely, since the bunch is gone."

"Maybe so," acknowledged Curly, "but I can stand it a while. It's better than having a gun play."

"Hah-hah!" laughed Vail. "They sure smoked you up good. But Tuffy was only funning. He told me afterward he just did it to tease you—but I thought I'd warn you, anyhow."

"Much obliged," nodded Curly. "Now have one on me. And by the way, when do we eat?"

"Poco pronto," responded Harry. "Soon as the beans are warmed up. What did you think of Tula, the old man's daughter? You know—the Mexican girl that waited on you!"

"Oh—her!" replied Curly. "Why, all right, I reckon. Didn't notice much—I was thinking about my horse."

"I'll tell her that!" exulted Handsome Harry. "You know, with these girls, if you don't look at them every minute and tell them how pretty they are, they'll pretend to have some case with a dashing stranger. And Tula picked out you."

"Oh, she did, hey?" observed Curly. "That's mighty complimentary, but right then I had another hunch. And sure enough, when I came out here was Tuffy with my paint horse held by the jaw!"

"Ho-ho!" shouted Harry. "He just did that to plague you. No, Tuffy ain't a bad kid, at all."

"All the same," responded Curly, "I'm going to write my name on him, the next time we meet in the road. When you steal a man's horse and then shoot him from ambush, that's carrying a joke too far."

"What? Tuffy steal your horse?" exclaimed Handsome Harry innocently. But Curly looked him straight in the eye.

"You know it!" he said. "And you can tell your little friend to keep plumb away from these parts. Because I'm here—and there ain't room for two."

"Oho!" said Harry. "So that's the way you feel! I thought you were a man of peace."

"Peace at any price," stated Curly. "I want peace so bad I'll fight for it."

"Not necessary," returned Vail. "You'll never see Tuffy around here anymore."

But Curly knew better—and inside of two weeks he had twenty good men at his back.

They sprang up miraculously, as if the Staked Plains was suddenly producing warriors for his purpose. First a cowboy drifted in, and then two more. And then, dragging in across the Llano Estacado, there came fifteen hunger-bitten buffalo hunters. Always before, though the herds were thinning, they had found hordes of buffalo, drifting north as the grass grew green; but now with a finality that admitted of no doubt they had discovered their occupation gone. Never again on those broad plains would the buffaloes mill and bellow, while from his stand in some gulch the hunter shot them down and the skinners came up with their teams. And meanwhile the hunters must eat.

They were men who had braved the wrath of the Comanches when their anger at the spoilers knew no bounds; and after a short talk with Curly Wells they took on as warriors, well content with no work and good pay. And then in twos and threes the tophands from Texas ranches drifted in to join the fray. For a show-down was at hand with the robbers of the mountains. Mike Broiles was hiring more men. But against him Hard Winter Johnson gathered an army of trained fighters, and awaited the Heel Flies' return.

After years of lip service to the goddess with the scales, the cattle king of the Pecos was whole-souled in his devotion to the cause of honesty and justice. For sixty miles, up and down the broad river which gave him control of the range, his cattle now grazed on a thousand hills, at the mercy of the rustlers from the mountains. And at his line camp to the south every cowboy had left him to throw in with the Heel Flies and Mike Broiles. The bridle was off, and men divided into two hostile camps.

In Lincoln, in Alamosa and the Desert of White Sands there were few men indeed who did not stand with the rustlers and live on company beef. But from Texas in angry haste came riders from every outfit which had suffered from the Heel Flies' raids, and while scouts sought out news of Tuffy's return they forgathered at Ganado Crossing. It was Johnson's beef now which filled their warrior bellies, and the pay of his gunmen was staggering; but his old feud with Broiles, now bursting into flame, made the tight-fisted cattle king generous. He fed all who came, and grained their gaunted horses; and when at last the word came that the Heel Flies were returning he belted on a pistol and rode the line.

For years it had been his boast that,

in camp or on the trail, he had never carried a gun. His voice had been for peace and in a hundred tight jams he had escaped without a scratch. But while he himself talked and laughed there rode at his back—or at night at his command—a band of reckless cowboys whose pride it was that they never swung a rope. They were gunmen, the predecessors of the new tribe of warriors which had sprung up like a dragon's teeth brood. And now, with eager joy they swarmed to the spoiling of him who had been their king. Had they not helped him to acquire a good half of his herd? Then half of it, at least, was theirs!

Every day, as Curly's men rode the range to keep down stealing, they found the tracks of driven-off steers. And in the warehouse at the fort, where Broiles held the beef contract, there were Rafter J hides by the score. Spies with field glasses watched Broiles' ranch from the heights of the mountains; there was much saddling and riding to and fro. Then one evening at dusk old Porfilio came in and beckoned his new boss aside.

"You hurry op," he whispered. "There is *beeg* herd—very beeg! And Mike Broiles has lots of cowboys, driving them steers across the desert. Santa Maria, I bet you they fight!"

"Yes, and I bet you we fight!" answered Curly. And with his cowboys he went dashing through the night.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NERVOUS HABIT.

AFTER years of toil and danger while he built up his mighty holdings, years of tolerant amusement at the industry of petty thieves who stole calves while he appropriated herds, Hard Winter Johnson at last found himself in the saddle, riding to fight if necessary for his own. The time had gone by when the men who raided his cattle were content with a side of beef. Now they stole by the hundred and came back for more; and over the mountains at Alamosa, like a fat spider in his net, Mike Broiles raked in the spoils. He, too, had become a king—the king of rustlers—but now he had gone entirely too far.

Back in the Indian days, when the Apaches watched the crossings and the Comanches followed his trail herds like wolves, the easy-going cattle king had left his gun in the wagon, for he was the leader of desperate men. The danger from their pistols in some drunken affray was greater than the perils of the trail, and he had prospered where sterner men had failed. His good-natured negligence had disarmed his enemies; while all the time, behind his back, his cowboys did the work which kept his range free of competitors.

But now as he took the old Rustlers' Trail at the head of sixty men, a much-worn six-shooter hung at Hard Winter's hip and a rifle bulged under his knee. Beneath his very eyes the king of Alamosa had grown like a monstrous sloth. By handling stolen cattle he had underbid all comers, selling his steers to the government itself. And there were those who hinted darkly at bribery and corruption in the awarding of contracts for beef. But with a laugh and a merry quip Johnson had sought out other markets, for Broiles was a quarrelsome man. But when his huge, hairy hand had reached over the mountains and snatched up this second herd, the man of peace had carried the war into Flanders—he was riding into the rustlers' domain.

Dawn found the weary posse in the gap of the high trail where Curly Wells had nearly been ambushed, and with a grim tightening of the lips Curly muttered a curse—he was coming to avenge that shot. Two men on two days had attempted his life—Mike Broiles and Tuffy Malone—and now for their

treachery he was bringing an answer that would not be turned lightly aside. A great herd was at stake, and the lives of many men; but to Curly there was more—his honor as a fighting man—and he rode at the head of his men. A few months had raised him from an unknown Texas cowboy to the leader of Johnson's warriors.

The lowing of the herd came faintly to their ears as they wound down the mountain trail. Far ahead, out on the desert, they saw a long line of dust, where the vanguard led the way. On that ninety-mile drive there was water at one well, near the point of the drifting White Sands; and regardless of other dangers the great herd had been strung out, lest they crowd about the water troughs and die. Now they moved on endlessly across the alkali flats, bawling their protest to the brazen desert sky.

"Turn 'em back!" shouted Johnson, spurring, down across the valley. "Every steer in that herd is mine."

Curly reined in beside him, the grim warriors trooped behind, and regardless of the rustlers who swarmed out from the Alamosa ranch house they raced down across the flats. The men at the drag broke and fled when they sighted them, and the flankers one by one whipped away; but at the point they encountered Mike Broiles himself, with twenty desperate men. They had rallied behind their leader and, while he cursed and shouted, they sat their horses in silence.

"Heh! And what do ye want?" he demanded with angry arrogance as Johnson rode up and confronted him. "Do you think, you old trail cutter, you can trim down my herd, like you do with those drovers from Texas? I've a bunch of b'ys behind me that will have a worrd to say before you perpetrate an outrage like that!"

He turned to roll his eyes on his grim-faced warriors and hearten them with a smile; but Hard Winter only laughed.

"All right, boys," he said to the daunted rustlers. "If you've got a 'worrd' to say, spit it out right now; because I'm not going to cut your herd. Every cow brute you've got is wearing my iron. Turn 'em back, boys. I'm going to take 'em all."

"I'll stay right here, with my friend Mr. Broiles," announced Curly in the sudden silence. "And the first move he makes, except to shoot off his mouth, I'll drill a hole plumb through him."

He smiled, and down the line of embattled warriors, he caught an answering grin. It was from Jim Knowles, the rustler who had met him in Broiles' pasture and helped him bring out Paint.

"Any of you gentlemen," he went on, "that have got business elsewhere, hang your gun belts on your horns and hit the trail. But this old walloper here" —and he pointed to Broiles—"is going to stay right under my guns."

"Ah, now, Misther Wells," began the rustler king ingratiatingly, "I can see you're quite a joker, yourself. But ain't this going a little far, threatening the life of a citizen and taking possession of his property? I've a bill of sale, I'll have you know, for every steer in that herd. And Henry Johnson, I warn ye, those cattle are under contract for delivery to the United States government. Turn them back if ye will, but by the gods above, I'll sue ye for plenary damages. There's still justice, and if I fail of my delivery I'll report ye to the colonel commanding. A hundred thousand dollars ain't a penny too much for the loss I'm sustaining this day."

"I don't know, Curly," observed Hard Winter, cocking his head at his war captain. "He's a worse man shooting his mouth off than he would be shooting bullets." And the cowboys behind him laughed.

"Nope. He's harmless," responded

Curly, shifting easily in his saddle to bring his pistol that much nearer his hand. "But I'll tell you, Mr. Broiles—cut out them graceful gestures. Keep your hands away from that gun."

"I'll have you to know," blazed up Broiles indignantly, "I don't need to resort to the gun. We've got justice in this county, and a true and loyal sheriff to see that you get your deserts. I'm a law-abiding citizen, but that old rascal there is the biggest damned cow thief in the country."

"Except you," retorted Johnson. "But, sheriff or no sheriff, I'll take every cow of mine home."

"You'll defy the sheriff?" screamed Mike Broiles accusingly. "You'll take the law into your hands? Then I warn ye, Henry Johnson, the people won't stand for it. There's a hereafter coming—I'm telling ye!"

"Yes, and there's one coming for you," warned Hard Winter, "if you don't leave my cattle alone. I've put up with you for years, rather than have any trouble; but right now I put my foot *down.*"

He rattled his brogan in the old, iron stirrup that had graced his saddle for years; and with a last, hateful look at his ancient enemy he reined out to help turn the herd.

Behind in a long line the cattle paced steadily on, for there was no grass to tempt them to stop; and at the point of a low sand hill the cowboys swung them back, turning the leaders toward Alamosa.

Nor were they loath to turn, for before them in the distance they beheld the cool mountains that they knew. There, rushing down from the peaks, were brooks of sparkling water and shade from the burning sun. They raised their heads and lowed, and soon the long herd was heading back across the flats. The swing trailed on behind, urged forward by Rafter J cowboys; and Mike Broiles with an oath gave over all pretense and rode away with his men.

"We'll hear from him," predicted Curly, "before we cross the range." But Hard Winter only smiled.

"He reminds me," he said, "of a blowed-up toad, that thinks he's as big as he looks. But most of that, with him, is wind. He's like several bad men that I've met on the trail. They prefer to do their fighting with their mouth."

As the herd neared Alamosa Curly touched Johnson on the arm and pointed to a sudden cloud of dust.

"There comes Tuffy Malone," he predicted. "But that's all right—you leave him to me."

"No—no grudge shooting!" vetoed Hard Winter. "I don't want any killing. It'll just bring on a war. Here, you take my gun and six-shooter and I'll go ahead and meet 'em. That's Tuffy; I know his hawse."

"Your horse," corrected Curly. "Didn't he steal it when he left? Well, what's the use of monkeying? You keep on fooling around with those renegade Heel Flies, and Tuffy or some one will kill you."

"Not me!" declared Johnson. "Just let me do the talking. Never seen a killer yet that I couldn't talk him out of it—and I've looked down many a gun."

"You're the boss," shrugged Curly. "But I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Johnson. I'm going to be right there—understand?"

"Yes, but no gun plays, no gun plays," interjected Johnson hastily, "or you'll bring on a general killing. At the same time," he added, as the rustler band drew nearer, "it won't hurt to line up our men."

"No, I'll bet ye!" agreed Curly; and when Tuffy and the Heel Flies rode up he had eighty men massed behind him.

"No gun plays, boys," he said. "That's the boss' orders. I'll tend to Tuffy Malone." And with his face

grimly set he reined in beside Johnson as they moved out to meet the outlaws. Every Heel Fly was there, many riding the same horses that they had stolen when they quit the store; and behind them were gathered every ragtag and bobtail that Broiles could muster at his ranch. Yet, even with the corral hands, they were only a scant sixty against over eighty Pecos warriors. But in the lead, beside Broiles, rode Tuffy Malone, whose ready gun had killed thirteen men. He was their champion, and they followed him proudly.

"Misther Johnson," declaimed Broiles, holding his hand up dramatically, "I have come to demand my cattle! I've got a straight bill of sale for every cow brute in that herd and I'll not be deprived of my rights."

He reined in his horse and rolled his eyes left and right, where the Heel Flies had lined up behind him. Then with a nod he rode up closer.

"If they're yours," responded Johnson, "you'll have to prove it in the courts. I won't give up a steer."

"But I tell ye," raged Broiles, edging in on him again, "I've got a clean bill of sale for every wan on them!"

"That's all right," answered Hard Winter. "I don't doubt your word. But if you bought those cattle you got them from some thief, because every brand there is mine. And as a matter of principle I never sell a cow on my home range. So your bills of sale are N. G.!"

"Oh, a thief, eh?" sneered Broiles, turning his sinister eyes on Tuffy. And then with extravagant politeness he bowed and waved his hand. "Let me introduce you then to the gentleman who sold them! Misther Malone!" And he drew back, leering.

"You ornery old scoundrel," began Tuffy, spurring forward regardless of danger. And with a quick turn of the wrist he snatched a pistol from under his arm and thrust it in Johnson's face. "Now!" he shouted. "Damn your black, lying heart—who's the cow thief, you or me?"

"Why, you are, Tuffy," responded Hard Winter, good-naturedly, "but this don't call for no gun play."

"No," spoke up Curly. "And I'd like to say right now that I've got a gun here, myself."

"I ain't talking to you!" flung back Tuffy over his shoulder. "I'm talking to this old walloper!"

The gun in his hand trembled as he thrust it out closer, but Johnson did not flinch.

"Oh, that's all right, Tuffy," he said. "I reckon you can see I'm unarmed."

"Yes, but that don't buy you nothing, with me!" cursed Malone. And something in the high, rasping pitch of his voice made Curly's hand itch for his gun. Here was a murderer, dead set for a killing.

"You're excited," soothed Johnson, gazing calmly down the gun barrel. And suddenly Tuffy's eyeballs dilated. Then slowly, at a slow pressure on the trigger, the double-action hammer drew back.

"Now!" he yapped. "You order back your men. You give me back them steers or I'll kill ye!"

A tense silence fell, and every man except Hard Winter sat frozen as if under some spell.

"Tuffy," he began, "you damned little rascal! You can't look me in the eye and pull off that gun. We've known each other too long."

"Oh, I can't, eh?" sneered Tuffy with deadly intentness. "I'd kill you, by grab, for a nickel! Didn't I work for you for years at forty dollars per, cutting these Texas brands out of trail herds? There ain't a straight Rafter J in that herd. Then whose cattle are they, hey? Are they yours or are they mine? Speak up now—I want them steers back!"

"You don't git 'em!" answered Hard

Winter resolutely. "And if you shoot me it's cold-blooded murder."

He eyed him calmly as the hammer moved back, and then Tuffy lowered his gun.

"Well, you old he-goat!" he burst out insulting; and gave way to a discordant laugh. "You old blackguard," he went on, "you think more of one cow than you do of keeping clear of hell. Put your gun up on purpose, so I wouldn't dare to shoot you. But I ain't got through with you, yet. Now you order these men away, because I'm going to *take* them steers, I don't give a damn what you say!"

He turned and faced the warriors, and as his eyes met Curly's the cold, murderous look returned.

"So here *you* are!" he said at last; and Curly nodded grimly.

"On the prod, eh?" went on Tuffy. "Swelling around with two guns on. You git!" And his wicked eyes narrowed.

Curly watched him, leaning forward and waiting for the break; but the slayer of thirteen did not start. He glanced behind him, and the Heel Flies stirred anxiously.

"*You* git!" spoke up Curly. "And be quick about it, too. You don't look bad to me."

He was calm and collected now, but poised for the draw, and as Tuffy reined away he smiled.

"He's going," whispered Hard Winter incredulously.

"That's right," answered Curly. "And a damned good idee. This killing bug he's got is just a nervous habit. And I aim to break him of it," he added.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAW OF THE LAND.

TUFFY MALONE, the boy leader of the Heel Flies and Mike Broiles' right-hand man, had been hurled from the pinnacle of his fame. He had ridden out all set to kill Hard Winter Johnson and shoot it out if necessary with his men, and the Heel Flies had ridden behind him. But in the scratch the wily Hard Winter had outfaced and defeated him, and Curly had added to his shame. A sudden hunch, some premonition that the luck had turned against him and that death was hovering near, had turned him from his purpose. And while wranglings and recriminations divided the ranks of the rustlers the Pecos men drove off the herd.

They were laughing and exultant, now that the man who was their leader had proven his mettle in war; but as they drifted over the mountains and turned the cattle loose on their range, Mike Broiles came whipping after them. At his stirrup rode the sheriff, Ed O'Keefe, hastily summoned from the saloons of Lincoln. And to enforce a due respect for the law of the land he had thirty-five deputies at his back.

"Mr. Johnson," began O'Keefe, fetching a paper from his pocket, "I'll have to arrest you on a charge of grand larceny. Mr. Broiles here has sworn out a warrant."

"All right," agreed Hard Winter equably. "I'll swear one out for him and, believe me, I'll make it stick. I'm a law-abiding citizen, but when they steal a whole herd I'll get it back *first*. Understand!"

"If you're addressing your remarks to me," responded the sheriff stiffly, "you'll have a chance to cool off in jail. I'm the duly elected sheriff and I'm here to enforce the law. So you'd better show a little more respect."

"Respect is one thing," retorted Johnson. "But if I'd waited for you to move, my cattle would have been in Las Cruces. Didn't I appeal to you before to get back them steers that Tuffy Malone and his cowboys stole? Didn't I swear out warrants against every one of them, before they'd crossed the Rio

Grande into Arizona? I saw all fourteen of 'em yesterday, right over at Alamosa. Why the devil don't you go and arrest them?"

"They're gone," answered the sheriff shortly. "Hit the trail for the Mexican line. But you come back with me and explain matters to the judge. I'm placing you under arrest."

He rode forward and laid his hand on Hard Winter's shoulder and the cattle king laughed indulgently.

"Very well, Mr. O'Keefe," he said. "I'm unarmed, so you don't need to grab me. And before I get through I'm going to prove to the world that Mike Broiles is nothing but a cow thief."

"And I'll prove," promised Broiles, "that Hard Winter Johnson is the biggest damned thief in the country. We'll leave it to the judge, and a jury of your peers. All right, Ed, you can let the hired hands go."

He waved insultingly at the band of Pecos warriors, who were lined up with Curly at their head, and Hard Winter nodded his dismissal.

"That's all, boys," he said. "You can wait for me at the Crossing. I'll prove every claim with *this*."

He tapped a section of gutter pipe, tightly plugged at both ends, which he had carried wrapped up in his slicker; and Curly smiled as he turned away. In that homemade receptable the cattle king of the Pecos carried papers which he never displayed. But he had hinted to Wells that it contained powers of attorney for over a hundred and fifty Texas brands.

Under these powers of attorney, which had been given him long before, he was authorized to seize and sell, on behalf of the owners, every cow of their brand in New Mexico. They had been given to him freely when, leaving Texas with his first trail herds, he had taken his neighbors' cattle with his own. It had been necessary, to prove title when the time for selling came. But it had hardly been contemplated that they would serve as a pretext for cutting other Texas herds.

Yet year by year, as the trail herds came through on the long drive to Arizona or Colorado, Johnson's Heel Flies had ridden out and taken by force every steer in a hundred brands. That much the Heel Flies knew—but what they did not know was that Hard Winter was justified by law. He had saved his legal papers for some emergency, such as this, concealed in that section of zinc pipe.

So he rode off confidently in the midst of his enemies—and when he was arraigned before the judge he proved title to every brand by an ironclad power of attorney. The case against him was dismissed, perforce, since a man cannot steal his own cows. And, then, turning grimly upon his ancient enemy, he swore out a warrant against Broiles.

Twist and squirm as he would the crafty king of Alamosa found himself caught in the trap he had set. He had admitted the possession of the cattle, in his testimony against Hard Winter Johnson; and neither judge nor sheriff, nor a jury of his partisans, could find a loophole for escape. Hurried conferences were held, a postponement was granted; and then, fresh from Santa Fe, a new lawyer was rushed in to save the fat from the fire. Spartan measures were adopted—a verdict of guilty was handed in. Then with a smirk the judge fined him five hundred dollars and Mike Broiles rose up panting for revenge. His lawyer was smiling now as he faced Hard Winter's wrath, and in behalf of his client he filed suit for a hundred thousand dollars damages.

It was night when Henry Johnson rode his foaming horse home and summoned Curly and Handsome Harry from their beds. He was excited and his eyes glowed like coals.

"They've jobbed me!" he cursed, forgetting his scruples against profanity. "They've jobbed me, the dirty crooks! I knowed there was something wrong when Mike Broiles plead guilty and they let him off with a fine. He owns every one of them—judge, sheriff and jury, and the little dog under the wagon. He's greased their paws until they'll do anything he tells 'em. I ain't got a Chinaman's chance! I expect to lose the case, but, so help me, I'll never pay a cent to Mike Broiles!"

"Then they'll throw you into jail," suggested the practical Curly. "You'd better hire a lawyer that's smarter than this Sweitzer and fight the devil with fire."

"No! No lawyers!" raved Hard Winter. "There ain't an honest man in ten thousand. I'm agin' 'em, the danged shysters, and I'll fight this out myself. I don't want a lawyer around!"

"I know a few tricks of the law, myself," observed Vail, after a contemplative silence. "And you're right, Uncle Henry—if you ever hire a shyster he'll grab every cent you've got. There'll be expenses and continuances and appeals to the higher courts, and first thing you know you'd've got off better to pay the hundred thousand and be done with it."

"I won't pay it!" yelled Hard Winter. "I won't pay a cent! What? Sue a man for taking back his own cattle? After Broiles has pleaded guilty of stealing them? That bunch has got together to rob me, right or wrong. They're after the hundred thousand dollars."

"A good lawyer," predicted Curly, "would put his finger right through that damage claim. He'd have the case thrown out of court. But if you don't get an attorney——"

"I won't do it!" insisted Johnson. "I won't pay a damned cent! And I won't have a lawyer around. I'll lay in jail and rot before I'll give up a nickel. Now that's settled. There's no use talking."

"Well, let him have his own way," said Handsome Harry at last. "Because when Uncle Henry makes up his mind you can't turn him back with a club."

"They'll grab every cow and every acre of land he's got, then," returned Curly as he rose to go. "That's the law, and Ed O'Keefe will enforce it. You're playing right into his hands."

"Let him grab," grumbled Hard Winter. "I'll find some way to beat him. It's just a plot to rob me and I'm not going to stand it. Good night, boys—I'll see you in the morning."

Curly went back to bed with the stunning realization that their victory had been turned to defeat. After losing in the field, and the courtroom, Broiles had found the weak joint in Johnson's armor—his unreasoning suspicion of lawyers—and he would press his advantage to the full. But in the morning, when Curly tried to point out the danger, he was met with a surly rebuff.

"That's my business," answered Hard Winter, his face bleak and set. And as Curly went out muttering he met Mrs. Johnson, waiting anxiously to get the news.

"Nothing doing," he reported, stumping glumly away. And for him the matter was closed. But not for Handsome Harry.

He, too, had pondered long on the intricacies of this case, but with an eye on its possibilities for profit; and more and more as Esperanza sought advice he played on her ignorance and fear. When she wept he comforted her—and once in the dusk he kissed her and hurried away. But on the morrow she was there again, a strange look on her face, a new light in her melancholy eyes; and when no one was near she let him kiss her again and murmur words which meant much—to her.

"Ah, my hosband," she sighed. "If he were only like you. But he will not listen when I talk. Is there no way,

Harry, that we can save our property? We have worked so hard—me and Tula."

"There is a way," answered Vail mysteriously. "I will tell you, some other time. When men lose their reason and try to turn their wives into paupers——"

"We must oppose them!" she responded fiercely.

"No—lead them." He nodded, with a meaning smile. "Can you trust me, Esperanza? Then listen!" And he whispered in her ear.

Other days came and went, there were kisses when no one looked; secret meetings and strange, desperate confidences. Then Johnson came riding from Lincoln with the news that he had lost. How could it be otherwise when he had not engaged a lawyer? The judgment was for a hundred thousand dollars.

"I won't pay a cent!" declared Hard Winter grimly; and Harry and Esperanza exchanged glances.

"There is a way, Henry," said his wife at last. "I have heard how it was used, before. You could transfer all your property to one that you trust, and then the lawyer would get nothing."

"Yes, but who to?" demanded Hard Winter eagerly; and suddenly her eyes lit up.

"There is Harry," she whispered, slipping her arms around his neck.

"I'll do it!" decided Johnson. And before the day was done he had signed all his property away.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SALAMANDER SAFE.

CURLY WELLS was far to the south with the Rafter J wagon, branding the calves that the round-up had missed, when the news of Broiles' victory reached his ears. Adolph Sweitzer, the lawyer, pleaded his case well, showing the loss to his client in money and prestige from his failure to deliver the cattle. The government, lacking the steers which they had contracted for with Broiles, had been compelled at great loss to buy beef in the open market, thus injuring the good name of the plaintiff and closing the door to future sales.

The judge had listened gravely to Hard Winter Johnson as he delivered his impassioned denunciation but, deciding the case on the law and the evidence, he had awarded the full damage to Broiles. One hundred thousand dollars! And all for the lack of a lawyer to present Johnson's case in legal form. Curly grunted and said nothing, for a good lawyer could beat it yet; but when a cowboy from the ranch brought the news of the property transfer he leaped on his horse and rode hard.

A thousand times as he pounded north he cursed himself for a fool for leaving the ignorant Hard Winter to his fate. And not until, in the barroom doorway, he saw Handsome Harry watching, did he rein in his foaming steed. He was in time—the schemer had not fled.

"Where's Johnson?" he demanded as Vail came out to meet him; and Handsome Harry looked him over shrewdly.

"He's around here, somewhere," he answered indifferently. "What's the matter—lose some more cows?"

"By grab—yes!" cursed Curly. "We're losing 'em every night. But that ain't a patching to this lawsuit. What's the use of my saving a few steers?"

"They'll all come in handy," returned Harry jauntily, "when we get the old man straightened out. And meanwhile, Mr. Wells, you can keep right on working. I'll see that your wages are paid."

"Yes, you'll play hell!" retorted Curly indignantly. "I don't need the damned job nor the wages either. So if you're my new boss—I've quit!"

"Well! Sorry to lose you!" replied Handsome Harry suavely. And then

the exultant smile suddenly left his face, for Johnson had stepped out behind him.

"Why, why—what you want to quit for?" he demanded of Curly; then beckoned him mysteriously inside.

"Come into the office," he said. "I was just about to send for you, anyway. And don't git bowed up, jest because I picked Harry—I know you're jest as honest as he is."

He led the way into a darkened room, its one high window barred with steel, its door a solid panel of oak, and Curly followed like a man in a dream. So the old man thought Harry was honest—as honest as he was!

"Mr. Johnson," he spoke up, "there's no use talking to me, if you think I'll take orders from Vail. I just came up to warn you to get that property back, before he skips out and leaves you flat."

"Aw, sho, sho, boy!" soothed Hard Winter. "Don't be jealous of Harry. I need you mighty bad now, to look after my range stuff while I'm busy here with this lawsuit."

"You haven't got any range stuff!" Curly answered hotly. "You done made Handsome Harry a present of it. What would you think of a man that would up and blow his head off, to keep from losing his finger nail? That's just what you've done—you're so danged mad at Broiles you've gone plumb out of your head. What's to hinder Handsome Harry from opening up that safe and taking every dollar you've got?"

"He don't know the combination," returned Hard Winter shrewdly; and Curly laughed and scratched his jaw.

"No, I'll tell ye," went on Johnson, "I wasn't born yesterday. There's no one in this world—except my wife, of course—that knows the combination of that safe. And the old Salamander has never been cracked yet—it's tight, or they'd've blowed it, sure."

He laid his hand fondly on the huge steel safe, on the front of which in brass was stamped the figure of a salamander, symbolizing its immunity from fire.

"I see," nodded Curly. "You ain't trusting Harry too far, then."

"No farther than I have to, because I don't trust anybody," returned Hard Winter with engaging frankness. "But when that suit was decided I had to trust *somebody*—they'd get me if I just gave it to my wife."

"Yes—and why the hell, then," demanded Curly, "didn't you hire a lawyer, and trust *him?* He could break this suit——"

"No lawyers!" pronounced Johnson. "I'm looking right now for the sheriff and Broiles to come—and maybe that shyster, Adolph Sweitzer—and I just want you to be here and observe the expression on his face when he sees he's euchered again. I've got this all planned out, down to the finest point, and Mike Broiles will never git a cent."

"He's got a judgment against you for a hundred thousand dollars. That's pretty good, for a start. And meanwhile you're tied up—you can neither buy nor sell—and Harry is holding the dough. What's to keep him from hitting the trail and hypothecating your property? I can see by his eye that's just what he's counting on. He was shore pleased when I told him I'd quit."

"Now, Curly," pleaded Johnson, "ain't I got troubles enough already without my boss gun fighter quitting me? Tuffy Malone is around here somewhere, keeping track of all these doings, and the minute you're gone he'll hop in and steal me blind, the same as he did before."

"Nope—he's skipped," said Curly. "But I'll tell you what I will do. You revoke that power of attorney that you gave to Handsome Harry——"

"He's a good boy, Curly," broke in Hard Winter persuasively, "and honest as the day is long. I don't know what I'd done when them Heel Flies was

here, without Harry to hold 'em down. He shore had a way with him, when they'd all git drunk at once——"

"Yes, and the reason was," charged Curly, "he was hand and glove with the whole outfit. I believe he's the head of the gang. I could tell when I rode in and Tuffy Malone started to get funny with——"

"He stood in with 'em, shore," conceded Johnson. "But every evening he'd come in and tell me all about it. I know him, and he's smart as a whip."

"Well—hell!" decided Curly. "I'll stay, just to spite him."

And the next morning while he lounged in front of the store he saw Broiles and the sheriff coming. But no posse rode behind them—just a little man wearing glasses, who held fast to the horn as he rode.

"Here's where I git the laugh on that lawyer," chuckled Hard Winter as he came out to gloat at his foes. "But you watch Mike Broiles, and if he starts to pull a gun on me——"

"I'll fix him," promised Curly agreeably. "But don't laugh till you're sure you've won."

Ed O'Keefe rode erect, for he had once been a soldier, his long *mustachios* whipping in the wind; and beside him, rolling orgulously in the saddle, Mike Broiles seemed to swell with triumph.

"Good marning to you, gentlemen," he greeted unctuously. "Sure, it's a foine place you have here, Misther Johnson. But it's the order of the court that the sheriff seize and sell it, unless you pay me that hundred thousand dollars."

"Yes, indeed, it's a fine place," replied Hard Winter genially, "and I'm sorry you had your long ride for nothing. But I've deeded all my property to Mr. Harry Vail." And he bowed to the smiling Harry.

"At your service, gentlemen," responded Handsome Harry. "I've been thinking for some time of entering the cattle business. So I took the occasion of this—er—slight misunderstanding—to buy Uncle Henry out."

"Lock, stock and barrel," continued Johnson, grinning maliciously at Mike Broiles' chagrin. But as Broiles exploded in a series of fervid curses the little lawyer plucked at his sleeve. He was a man so small and stooped he looked almost like a boy, perched up on the back of his horse; but the eyes behind his glasses were keen and aggressive, and his hooked nose was thrust forward like a beak.

"Are you aware, Mr. Johnson," he inquired in measured tones, "that the statutes of New Mexico permit imprisonment for debt? That is the law, and Sheriff O'Keefe is here to enforce it, without fear and without favor, as is his duty. May I suggest then, since you say you have sold your place, that you take from the purchase price a sufficient sum to pay my client, and meet the judgment of the court?"

He paused and cleared his throat and as Mike Broiles heard his words his huge paunch began to quiver like jelly.

"Aha! my foine fellow!" he cried exultantly, waving a fat, hairy hand at Johnson. "So you thought you'd play me a trick, eh? You may scold about the shysters, but I notice, whin you can, you try some of their hocus-pocus yourself."

He laughed heartily, and in his shadow the little lawyer peeped about, his black eyes as sharp as a bird's. But when he saw Curly, with two pistols in his belt, he drew back quickly out of sight.

"Well, gentlemen," spoke up the sheriff, "this has gone far enough. What is your answer, Mr. Johnson, to the order of the court that your property be taken and sold?"

"My answer?" exclaimed Hard Winter, rocking drunkenly on his feet as he beheld his fine plans brought to naught. And as he turned Handsome Harry

drew his eyebrows up quizzically and met his stare with a smile. Curly Wells, looking on, read the answer in Harry's face, in case Johnson asked for his land. It was hidden behind that smile in a leer of studied insolence; but Hard Winter did not ask.

"To hell with the court!" he burst out with savage vehemence. "And to hell with you, Mike Broiles. So help me, I'll never pay a cent. You can put me in jail if you wish."

Broiles pulled down his lip and glanced inquiringly at the lawyer, then turned and nodded to the sheriff.

"All right, Ed," he said.

And half an hour later Johnson rode off to Lincoln, a prisoner.

CHAPTER XVII.

A JAIL BREAK.

LIKE the tramp that he looked in his old, shabby clothes and his splay-footed, cowhide brogans, Henry Johnson, the cattle king of the Pecos, was cast into the Lincoln jail. All the town came to stare at him, like a monkey in a cage, and Mike Broiles shook with laughter; but with cold, vindictive rage Johnson repeated for the thousandth time the phrase that had become like a litany.

"You can keep me in jail till I rot, but I'll never pay Mike Broiles a cent."

Jack Moore rode up to see him and arrange a reasonable compromise, or carry it to a higher court; but, though by either way he could escape from the adobe jail, Johnson doggedly shook his head. He was deaf alike to the appeals of his friends and the loud guffaws of his enemies. It was as if some sudden madness had cast reason from its throne, leaving him sane on all subjects, save one.

Back at the store Curly Wells lingered about from day to day, not unlike a faithful dog whose master has gone—for he expected Henry Johnson to return. A day and a night in the foul Lincoln jail would soon cure him of his stubborn fit. And meanwhile, at Ganado Crossing, there was something in the air that made Curly afraid to go.

Handsome Harry regarded him dourly when he looked at him at all, Mrs. Johnson was malevolently silent. And Tula, when she grudgingly served him his breakfast, wore a fixed and frozen smile. Her blue-black eyes, at once so cold and so fraught with passion, seemed to stab him when he entered the room. And yet for the very reason that he found himself unwelcome, Curly Wells hung around the store. At times the impulse seized him to take his horses and ride home, leaving this ill-omened house to its fate; but Hard Winter had trusted him to look after his cattle—how much more so his wife and daughter!

There was something strange going on—he discovered Tula and Harry with their heads close together in a corner. And then, when he decided that they were planning to elope, he discovered Harry making love to her mother. There were quarrels late at night in which women's voices were suddenly raised and as suddenly drowned in silence; and all the time, with his wise, blasé smile, Handsome Harry strode across the scene, like the villain in a tank-town play. Only this was no make-believe, for Harry Vail took himself seriously. He was the lady-killer.

Curly gazed at him scornfully when they met face to face and his lips curled with grim, unspoken words. But Harry passed him by with a leer and a swagger, his pipe clenched jauntily between his teeth. They did not speak, for each knew what the other thought, and each had his reasons for silence. There was a fortune in the safe, where with miserly thrift Hard Winter had stored away like a pack rat every paper and every dollar that he got.

When he had ridden home from some

far journey with his saddlebags full of gold, it had gone into the safe until every corner was crammed. to make room for the currency and deeds. For forty miles, along both sides of the river, he held title to the land which controlled the water of the Pecos. There were huge bundles of quitclaims, deeds for thousands of homesteads; there were mortgages on range land and cattle. And only the combination, and the presence of Curly Wells, prevented Vail from opening the safe.

The property was his, every cow and every acre, until his power of attorney was revoked; and yet by force of habit he put up with Curly's presence, for his instinct was that of the fox. Where others fought and killed to gain what they desired, he resorted to subterfuge —to persuasion and guile. He had even learned to wait. Curly Wells strode forth restlessly a thousand times a day to look up the road for his boss; but Harry, behind the scenes, bent the women to his will and in the end Mrs. Johnson broke the spell.

"Mister Welless," she said one morning, as he stood outside the door, gazing off up the Lincoln trail. "My hosband will never return. Do not look, and look and look—you make me very nervous. But Henry has gone out of his head. He is crazee!"

"He shore is!" agreed Curly, "if he thinks for a minute I'm going to hang round this rancho much longer."

"Then why do you stay?" she asked; and Curly glanced at her curiously. She, too, had that look of smoldering, tense agony that comes from long waiting and thinking over haunting thoughts —from loving and hating, at once. Like Tula, her blue-black eyes were bidding him begone; but Curly had steeled his heart.

"I stay," he said, "because he told me to stay. I know about how welcome I am."

"And how welcome is that?" she inquired, smiling darkly. But Curly only shrugged his shoulders.

"You are foolish," she chided. "Tula and I are perfectly safe. It was different, I admit, when Tuffee was here. But he is gone—all them bad men are gone."

"Yes—all except Harry," answered Curly grimly; and instantly her anger was aflame.

"Shut your mouth!" she cried in Spanish. "I am tired of your dog's tricks, you yapping cur of a Texano. You are trying to drive out Harry, so you can have a free field with Tula and——"

"Say, you shut your own mouth!" replied Curly in rattling Mexican. "What do I care for your daughter? Have you ever seen me give her a look? The Texans are wolves—they do not mix with coyotes. And no one can call me a dog!"

"Then I call you that!" she screamed. "Leave my house. And when my hosband comes home I will tell him what you said—that the Texans do not mate with dogs. He will take his gon and shoot you."

"Yes, and serve me right, too," agreed Curly in a pet, "for trying to protect his womenfolks. You can save them Mexican cuss words for some yap that don't speak Spanish. I'm through!"

He flung his saddle on War Paint and rode off south without a word. But two days later he rode back at a madder gallop, for Handsome Harry had fled. A Mexican had come spurring to beg him, for the señora, to come and come at once. And he had added that Tula was gone.

The sordid play was ended, the base pretense was over. As well as he knew anything Curly knew the safe was empty— and he knew who had revealed the combination. Only Esperanza Johnson, faithless wife of the cattle king, could betray that secret to Harry.

"Damn a Mexican," he grumbled.

"You can't trust none of 'em. And she called me a Teehanno dog!"

But when he reined in before the door and she beckoned him in, he spoke more kindly, for she was weeping bitterly.

"Look! Look!" she cried, wringing her hands in anguish as she showed him the open safe. "All is lost! He has taken everything!"

"That's right," agreed Curly. "Which way did they go? Or don't you want me to kill him?"

"Kill him—yes!" she raged. "But before you shoot the dog, give him first the brand of a traitor. Slash a knife across his face, so that all men may know him. He has betrayed me, and stolen my daughter!"

"Of course," nodded Curly. "I knew it, all the time. This is going to be bad news for Uncle Henry."

"He must never know!" she pleaded. "Do not tell him, Mr. Welless. I am very sorry now that I sent you away, but I——"

"I reckon you figured," suggested Curly, "that he'd take *you* with him."

"You have guessed it," she wept, "my terrible secret! But do not inform Henry or he will cast me off. I shall die of the shame and disgrace. And yet, how could I know? Harry was always so kind to me—he did not seem that kind of a man. And Henry, my hosband, he never spoke nice to me. He never introduced me to his friends. He was ashamed to have married a Mexican."

"Oh, no!" defended Curly. "That's just his way. But don't talk so loud—your servants will hear."

"I have sent them all away and barred every door. They do not even know we are robbed. And now, if you ride hard and catch up with Harry they will think it is all about Tula."

She glanced up at him eagerly, but Curly shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, and then I'd catch hell," he said, "for getting into a fight over a woman."

"Oh, you mean from Meleessa, the honey man's daughter? But I thought you had quarreled and parted!"

"Well, I seen her last month and she kinder smiled at me," explained Curly. "So I reckon I'll turn this over to Tula's father."

"But he is shut op—in jail!" shrilled Esperanza, her eyes dilating. "And please do not inform him, Mr. Welless!"

"He'll find out, sooner or later," observed Curly philosophically. "But I'll tell him," he added, "that Harry was a burglar, and he opened the safe, himself."

"What you mean?" she demanded. "Oh, you know everything—everything! Will you tell Henry that I betrayed his secret? Then on that day he will take my life."

"You can do your own talking," answered Curly shortly. "Which way did Harry go?"

"We went north, toward Las Vegas," she replied reluctantly. "He took our buggy, and two fast horses."

"They're on the train, by this time," decided Curly. And he rode hard, changing horses, to Lincoln.

That night when the jailer came to look at his prisoners the door to the adobe still stood. But the stout iron bars had been torn from the window and Henry Johnson was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FAIR HAIR AND BLUE EYES.

IT was the joke of Lincoln County that their adobe jail would not hold anybody but a drunk. Once recovered from his cups the prisoner dug out or was rescued by some friend with a crowbar. The sheriff found the tracks of a pair of high-heeled boots outside Henry Johnson's cell, but both Henry and his rescuer were gone.

A long line of dust swept north like a meteor on the trail of Handsome Harry. But Curly Wells rode south, wondering deeply on the perfidy of women with blue-black eyes. There was something in the breed, and no pure-strain Texan would seek his mate in a Mexican *jacal*. Or if he did, he lived to regret it. Fair hair and blue eyes were the signs that Curly banked on, even if she did pack a gun.

There was a familiar covered wagon in the shade of Jack Moore's cottonwoods, on the edge of the irrigated hay fields; and on the trail wagon behind was a tier of sawed-off stumps, the "bee gums" of Honey McCoy. The old man pottered about among his stands beneath the trees; and by the wagons Curly spied the spritely Julius Cæsar, leaping and running in kittenish delight.

"Oh, hell," he sighed, "she shore was like an angel, till she reached up and grabbed out that shotgun. Well, I'll stop in and tell Jack the news."

He reined in before the gate in front of the long, shady gallery where the colonel generally sat when at home; but only an old hound ambled forth to greet him, yawning and stretching as he whined his welcome.

"Well, Rowdy, old boy," patted Curly. "How's the coyote business, huh? You been fighting them Mexican dogs again?"

Rowdy flapped his chewed ears and whined again, joyously; and then in the doorway the angel face appeared which had haunted Curly's dreams for months. Fair hair and blue eyes, fairer and blue than ever, and even the suspicion of a smile; but one glance at his grim face, drawn by day-and-night riding, and Melissa gasped and fled.

"She's going for that gun," predicted Curly to the hound; but he tramped boldly into the house. It was his home, when he came that way.

"Why, Curly Wells!" exclaimed Mrs. Moore, rising up from her sewing. "And Jack has been looking for you everywhere. Did you know that Tuffy Malone and the Heel Flies are back? They were seen at the lower crossing, yesterday."

"Nope," answered Curly. "Where's the vision in blue that I seen just now at the door? Ain't she the prettiest little trick you ever saw? Even the honey bees like her—mebby because she's so sweet——"

"You hush up!" cried Mrs. Moore reproachfully. "She ran away home, of course. Don't you ever take anything seriously?"

"Shore do," grinned Curly. "When she reached for that——"

"Be still!" signaled the lady, pointing anxiously at a door; and Curly opened it with ponderous directness.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "If here ain't Melissa, the queen of the honey-making bees!" And he threw open the door with a flourish. I met a bee up in Lincoln—a yaller-legged feller—and he told me the wagon had moved back."

"Yes, we've moved down again," responded Melissa, stepping shyly into the room. "Only——"

"Oh, that's all right," smiled Curly. "There's plenty room for both of us; and I ain't going to be here along, nohow. I seen Cæsar, out under the trees."

"Yes—he's there," she answered, and glanced up at him with scared, appealing eyes.

"Bravest cat I ever saw!" praised Curly. "The old man says he stood off a mountain lion. Let's go out and see him—after a while."

"I—I don't know whether you'd dare to come," she faltered. "After all I said—that day."

"Oh, that's all right," nodded Curly. "You stand up for your rights. I've looked down so many guns since you pulled that old slug thrower I reckon I've got back my nerve."

"You—you're always laughing at me," she said, looking him straight in the eye, "but I'll bet you were scared, at the time."

"Well, I was mad," replied Curly, "if that's what you mean. Came mighty nigh going back to Texas."

"Only you saw that pretty Mexican girl, up at Ganado Crossing, so you decided to stop over a while, eh?"

"Who—Tula?" demanded Curly, now suddenly on the defensive; and Melissa nodded mischievously.

"And then," she went on, pursing her lips to show the dimples, "Handsome Harry cut you out, and ran away with her!"

"He didn't cut nothing!" cried Curly indignantly. "Old Hard Winter told me, when they took him off to jail, to stay there and watch that big safe. It was plumb full of money—and papers."

"Oh, that's all right," mimicked Melissa sweetly, "you don't need to explain, Mr. Wells. Only Manuel Ortiz came down from there last week and he said——"

"He lies in his throat!" interrupted Curly. "And I'll take it out of his hide if I see him. But of course if you want to believe a danged Mexican *pelado*——"

"Now, Melissa," chided Mrs. Wells, "you stop making things up. Manuel said nothing of the kind. Mr. Wells might go out and shoot him."

"Nope, nope," broke in Curly, rising up and bowing gallantly. "If he's a friend of Melissa's——"

"He is not!" she denied; and then her dimples grew until she burst into a gurgling laugh. "I thought I'd just show you," she said, "that I can lie as well as you can. But now that Tuffy has come back I expect you to stay right here. Because you know," she ended gravely, "he might come up and try to steal—Paint!"

"Melissa McCoy!" exclaimed Mrs. Moore reprovingly. And then she, too, burst into laughter.

"Well, anyway," she said, "I guess there's no harm done. Now you children run out and pay a visit to Father McCoy—and, Mr. Wells, we'll expect you for supper!"

"I'll be back!" promised Curly; but as he romped out the door a stern voice called his name. It was Jack Moore on a rode-down horse.

"Come over here," he ordered. "I want to see you."

"All right," answered Curly without breaking his stride. "Be back in a minute, Mr. Moore."

"This is important!" barked the colonel imperatively.

"Sure—and so is this!" retorted Curly, helping Melissa over an imaginary ditch; but at the gate he paused, reluctantly.

"Well, so long, Melissa," he said, offering his hand. And the queen of the honey bees pouted.

"Good-by, Mr. Wells," she bowed. "I hope you won't kill Manuel."

"Come, come!" spoke up Moore impatiently. So they shook hands and parted, with a smile.

"What's your dadburned hurry?" demanded Curly querulously, as he turned back to join the colonel. "When you see two young people, holding hands and swapping confidences——"

"Say! Do you know," burst out the colonel, "that Tuffy Malone and his gang are back? They crossed a big herd down the river, yesterday!"

"Keno!" responded Curly. "It's all right with me. My boss has gone broke and skipped the country between two days. I don't care whether school keeps or not."

"But he left his cattle, didn't he?" snapped Moore. "And I reckon he left them in your care."

"Shore did," agreed Curly. "Only he didn't leave any money. And who's going to pay my men?"

"I will," answered the colonel. "Or, that is, I'll see they're paid. The wages of a cowhand are a first lien on the property, no matter who owns the herd."

"Fine and dandy," retorted Curly. "But did you ever think, colonel, we ain't got any law in this country? It's all right to talk of liens, but that sheriff up at Lincoln wouldn't give me a dollar, on a bet. So I'm on my way south to fire the whole outfit. Have to pay 'em off with horses, at that."

"Now here!" yapped Moore. "Will you listen to me a minute? I don't want a single man fired. Things have been kind of quiet, but with Tuffy Malone back we'll need every warrior we've got. And I'd like to inform you, young man, that the Texas Cattlemen's Association is ready to back my hand."

"I—see!" nodded Curly. "Them cattle that Tuffy crossed——"

"——were stolen in Texas—every one of them!"

"Well, if that's the way you put it," observed Curly, "I reckon I'm due to stay."

"You are!" rapped out the colonel. "And don't you stop for anything until you take up those outlaws' trail."

"How about a little supper?" inquired Curly. "I've been riding two days and a night."

"No, you want to see that girl," replied the colonel accusingly. "But this is no boy's play."

"Well, gimme a strip of jerked beef, to gnaw on when I'm riding!" And Curly swung up into the saddle.

The next day, and the next month, he was on the trail of Tuffy Malone. Then he came back, driving the herd.

Slowly, with travel-worn feet and the alkali of distant deserts still crusted on their gaunted sides, the bawling Texas steers moved in to Deep Springs and spread out along the water front to drink. It was like a bovine heaven, but the cowboys lopped wearily in the saddle. Curly Wells stepped down and stripped the bridle off of Tige, who sighed deeply as he drank his fill. Then he raised his head and whinnied to Croppy, who was neighing to him from the wagons.

Curly knelt down stiffly and washed the grime from his bearded cheeks. In the shade of the cottonwoods he saw a little girl in blue, holding a tiger-striped kitten in her arms. But as he stepped up on his horse Jack Moore came riding out, to inspect the captured herd.

"Well!" he said. "You've been gone quite a while. I've had a man out looking for you. Bad news."

"I got plenty, myself—you can keep it," returned Curly, "until the boys and I make up our sleep."

"But this is urgent!" insisted the colonel. "Something that's got to be attended to. A big gang of men has entered your upper range and is driving off your cattle by the thousand!"

"Too bad," shrugged Curly. "But didn't you never hear, colonel, that General Lee has surrendered? The war's over now and they ain't no slaves, for you slave drivers to pop your whips over. So you and your Association can wait."

"Well, get your supper first," conceded Moore. "And I'll give you a change of horses, all around. But I'm satisfied this Texas raid was nothing but a ruse, to draw you and your men out of the country."

"All right," grumbled Curly, "have it your own way, Mr. Ranger. But if that was a ruse, excuse me from the real thing. I've been plumb to San Simon, Arizona. There's your steers all right, but there's nothing much left of 'em but horns, and rawhide and backbone. You can believe it or not, but them steers beat us to the river, and only had a two days' start. They rushed 'em across the desert on a long, high

trot and turned 'em loose in the Rio Grande *bosques*. Then while we were chasing Tuffy his side-kickers gathered 'em up again and shot 'em across the country to Stein's Pass. Did I hear you mention supper?"

"Supper's waiting," answered the colonel. "But there's one thing more."

"Never mind it," replied Curly. "Unless my girl has gone back on me. Ain't that Melissa, out under the trees?"

"Mrs. Johnson sent a man, not an hour ago——"

"All right!" yelled back Curly. "Gimme a horse and I'll go up there. Plenty time for a rest when I'm dead. I take it all back about the war being over!" And he spurred poor Tige into a lope.

CHAPTER XIX.

HANDSOME HARRY CASHES IN.

A BIG band of cowboys rode out of the south at dawn, heading in toward Ganado Crossing; and as they sighted the store Curly Wells spurred on ahead, to do his duty by Esperanza Johnson. She was a woman that, for some reason, he could not wholly despise; although she had betrayed her husband's secret to her lover. For in his heart he knew that old Hard Winter had neglected her and compelled her to work like a slave.

She stood waiting by the gate, a broken creature in somber black with eyes that were tragic with despair.

"Oh, Mr. Welless!" she cried, running out to meet him. "Now what do you think has happened? A man came here yesterday and walked into my house, just as if it belonged to him. He said he had a mortgage, and if my hosband did not pay him he would turn me out of my home."

"Who from?" demanded Curly. "Who gave him the mortgage? I'll bet this is Mike Broiles' work."

"May the saints protect me—I did not think to ask! When he came in so cheeky and looked at all my furniture I just told him to go away."

"Where is he?" asked Curly. "I'm going up north, where there's a big bunch driving off cattle."

"I do not know," she mourned. "When I thought of my house being taken by some stranger I almost went out of my head. I was crazee—and then he was gone."

"Well, you're all right," soothed Curly. "I'll attend to him later. Looks to me like Mike Broiles was trying to collect, now that Hard Winter is out of the country."

"They will leave us nothing—nothing," she said disconsolately. "And now they are stealing our cattle. A *vaquero* rode in yesterday and said they were sweeping the range, taking every steer and cow that they found."

"We'll see about that," responded Curly grimly; and spurred out to join his men.

The whole country was at war, men were fighting and stealing everywhere—even Jack Moore was beginning to miss cattle. But never before had the rustlers entered a range and rounded it up by days' work. The tired Pecos warriors scanned the ridges as they advanced until they came out on the broad, rolling plains; and there before their eyes they beheld a regular round-up, with two wagons and a big herd of horses.

"Well, well!" observed Curly, as he saw the wide-flung circle sweeping the prairie clean of cattle. "Right here is where we get to burn a little powder, unless all signs and omens fail."

He reined in on top of a roll to look out the country; and behind him, with bloodshot eyes, the desert-weary warriors sized up the opposing band. They had ridden so long on the trail of elusive cow thieves that the sight of this big outfit, calmly gathering in their cattle, almost gave them a thrill of joy. But no scouts rode to meet them, there

was no bunching up of warriors. As if nothing had happened the circle men kept their stations and Curly glanced back at his cowboys.

"Something funny here, fellers," he said. "Let's ride down and eat up the cook's grub."

They let out a yip as they fell in behind him, four abreast and sixty strong, the hardest-looking men that the Pecos country had ever seen, ready at once for a feed or a fight.

"Morning, Cusi!" hailed Curly as they rode up to the wagons where the grizzled old cook eyed him sourly. "What's the chance for a little breakfast for a bunch of poor cowboys that's got lost and been traveling all night?"

"Well, I might be able to feed you—but keep your hawses out of my camp! I won't have 'em tracking around!"

"Shore, shore!" agreed Curly. "And thank you kindly, uncle. What outfit are you working for, anyhow?"

"Jackson and Tuttle!" announced the cook, turning back to his pots and ovens; and Curly glanced at the wagons. On the side of each was burned the familiar "JT" connected, for Jackson and Tuttle were a big firm of commission men that bought for the St. Louis stockyards.

"Where's the boss?" inquired Curly at length; and the cook pointed briefly with his butcher knife.

"That's him with the white hat," he said; and Curly rode out alone. Something told him that the Rafter Js were doomed.

"Good morning," he nodded to a man by the fire, where a big battery of stamp irons was laid out. "I'm Curly Wells of the Rafter J outfit. What's your idea—rounding up all our stuff?"

The JT boss looked him over for a moment, then reached into the pocket of his vest.

"Your outfit's sold," he answered, "to the Stockyards Bank, St. Louis. We're gathering the cattle for the bank."

He handed over an official paper and Curly glanced at it briefly.

"Happen to remember," he inquired, "the name of the seller?"

"Harry Vail," replied the foreman promptly.

"You win!" responded Curly and turned back to the wagons, where the cook was pouring out coffee.

There would be no more range riding and chasing of cow thieves. Handsome Harry had cashed in on his power of attorney—and Hard Winter's land had gone, too.

"Well, boys," he announced to the expectant cowboys, "Handsome Harry has sold the whole outfit. So here's where we make up our sleep."

"How about our pay?" inquired a warrior suspiciously. "Have we done all this riding for nothing?"

"Your wages are a lien on the cattle," replied Curly. "Jack Moore will see that you're paid."

"Then drink hearty, boys," cheered the warrior, holding up his tin cup. "This will break Tuffy Malone's little heart."

"No more Rafter Js to steal," chanted another. "What will poor old Mike Broiles do?"

"He'll start to work on Jack Moore," predicted Curly. "So don't any of you boys hurry off."

They rode back leisurely to Johnson's Store where they rested for two days and cleaned up.

And then, just at dusk, Hard Winter came in sight on the trail that led down from the north.

"Howdy, boys!" he greeted cheerily, as he passed the cowboys' camp. "What're you all doing here? I done lost all my cattle. Lost all my land, too—so I don't reckon I need you any more."

"Oh, that's all right, uncle," replied Curly for the crowd. "We're waiting to hear from Jack Moore."

"Are they stealing from him?" de-

manded Hard Winter eagerly, stepping down from his old crow-bait horse. "Well, Jack will need you all if he makes good his word—— Have you got any coffee in that pot?"

He poured out a generous cupful, sipping it off little by little as he squatted on his heels by the fire; and the cowboys gazed in awe at his old, ragged clothes and the holes in his worn-out shoes. But as if nothing had happened to mar his fortunes the cattle king told stories and jokes. Soon he had the boys all laughing, as on many another night he had furnished the entertainment for the crowd; and not until the last of them began to nod by the fire did he rise up and look toward the house.

"Come over a minute," he beckoned to Curly, and led the way into his deserted store. The shelves were half empty now, the floor cluttered with papers and waste where the cowboys had been helping themselves, and Hard Winter heaved a sigh.

"Well, they're all robbing me now, eh?" he said. "What's the news from Tuffy Malone?"

"We gave him a little run into Arizona last week. But he'll be back—the pickings are good."

"I reckon so," observed Johnson. "This Jackson-and-Tuttle outfit seems satisfied to gather as they go."

"The boss was down yesterday trying to hire us boys to protect the lower range. But I told the ornery yap to skin his own skunks—he's working for a thief, and he knows it."

"Oh, no," defended Hard Winter; "Jackson and Tuttle are all right. It's Harry Vail that robbed me—but by grab, Curly, I couldn't ketch up with him, nowhere."

"Too smart for you," nodded Curly. "That man is a crook."

"Don't I know it?" sighed Johnson. "I'd've saved a million dollars if I'd taken your advice, at the start. The low-lived whelp, I'll kill him!"

"I'll save you the trouble, if he shows up here," promised Curly. "What did you find out about him, back East?"

"Well, he went to St. Louis, and the Stockyards Bank bought the cattle for ten dollars, round. Paid him cash for thirty thousand—and there's thirty thousand more. But whether they'll ever git 'em is a question."

"Yes, and a big one," agreed Curly. "The rustlers are whirling into 'em. Running 'em off every day by the hundred. And Ed O'Keefe is letting 'em steal the limit while he carries on his own private feud. Seems he's fell out with his posse and they're fighting among themselves. Where did Handsome Harry go, from there?"

"Oh, back to Kentucky," shrugged Johnson. "That's where he came from, originally. I found out he'd been a train robber in the old Newton gang—that's how come he drifted out West. Well, he went to a big banker in Louisville and showed the papers that he'd stole from my safe. And then he gave a blanket mortgage on all the property I've got for two hundred and twenty thousand dollars. They sold it to a big investment company."

"So you're cleaned, eh?" said Curly; and Johnson nodded.

"Yes, I'm cleaned," he stated. "It's going to be a long, hard winter for me. But I aim to fool 'em, yet. I'm going to homestead the quarter section on both sides of the crossing, and a homestead is exempt from foreclosure. That'll give me the store and the corrals and my house, and I'll manage to scrape a living, somehow. I can see it all now, and I made a big mistake—— But Mike Broiles will never get a red cent."

"You figure you've beat him, anyhow, eh?" grinned Curly; and Hard Winter showed his teeth.

"Yes, and I'll kill him," he cursed, "if he ever crosses my path! And I'll get Handsome Harry, too."

"That can wait," observed Curly. "But take a tip from me and file on this land—right—now. Luck's running against you, uncle, so don't take no chances. Write a notice and stick it on the door."

"Oh, sho, sho!" protested Hard Winter; but at last he posted the notice and Curly went off to bed.

In the morning a sheriff's posse was riding through, with Mike Broiles at its head.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE SADDLE.

CURLY WELLS and his warriors were sleeping in the open, their tarp-covered beds flung down along the fence to escape the full sweep of the wind. Inside the corral their horses raised their heads, then circled in a flurry of speed; and as Curly rose up he saw a big posse of men riding boldly through their camp. Then on the vest of one of the leaders he caught the flash of a silver star—and Mike Broiles craned his head to look down.

"Well, well!" he grinned exultantly as he caught sight of his archenemy in bed; but as dust-covered tarpaulins gave up men in every direction he held up his hand for peace.

"Good marning, b'ys!" he hailed. "Did I break up your beauty sleep? Har-har! It's only Mike Broiles and Johnny King with his deputies, on our way to the JT wagon."

"All right, then—keep a-going!" answered Curly shortly. But the posse had come to a halt.

"Oh, no hurry," replied Broiles. "We might aven stop for breakfast if anny of you gentlemen insisted. It's been a long ride, and a windy one, since we left Lincoln yesterday avening. What's the news from Henry Johnson?"

"We ain't giving out news!" returned Curly. "And next time you fellers ride into my camp, you sing a little song on the way."

"Ah-ha-ha!" laughed Broiles. "We caught you napping that time. But a posse of deputy sheriffs can ride where they will. No offense, of course—no offense!"

Curly had risen to his feet, buckling his gun belt around his waist; and all along the fence warriors were stamping on their boots and reaching for their pistols and guns. There was something vaguely sinister in this invasion of their camp, but Broiles was still holding up his hand.

"That's all right, b'ys!" he soothed. "We ain't looking for anny trouble. But say, by the great hornspoons, who the hell is this now? If it ain't Henry Johnson, himself!"

He threw up both hands in affected surprise as Hard Winter appeared in the doorway; but the deputies smiled grimly, reining their horses around, the better to keep him in sight.

"Yes, it's Henry Johnson!" answered the old man defiantly. "And you git off my land, you dadburned cow thief. I don't want you around—understand?"

"To be sure, I understand!" retorted Mike Broiles fiercely. "But since when, Misther Johnson, has this become your land? Didn't you sell it to Handsome Harry Vail?"

He grinned provokingly as he mouthed out that hateful name and Johnson came down toward him, bristling.

"Since last night!" he yapped, "when I homesteaded the place. It's exempt now from judgment, and the mortgage to boot. And I'm ordering you off my premises!"

"Well, order all you want to!" howled back Broiles in a fury. "I'll give you to understand I'm the undersheriff now, and as such I'll go where I please! And another thing, Misther Johnson, you're a fugitive from justice! You broke out of the Lincoln County jail!"

He pointed a quivering finger at Hard

Winter's breast and swelled with avenging wrath.

"I have a warrant here for ye!" he announced. "So kape a civil tongue in your head."

"And you keep your mouth—shut!" cut in Curly, stepping forward and confronting Broiles. "You and your little tin badge—you can't arrest nobody! When a goat herder like you claims to represent the law——"

"I'm a deputy sheriff!" yelled Broiles; and Curly beckoned his men up behind him.

"You're a deputy nothing," he answered. "Now shut up and let Uncle Henry talk. You've dealt him enough misery and me and the boys won't stand for it. He don't leave this ranch unless he wants to."

"Mike Broiles," quavered Hard Winter, "you've ruined me and I'll admit it. But you'll never get my house or my store. I've preëmpted this quarter section and there's the notice, on the door. As for the rest, I haven't got anything. You can go to hell with your judgment."

I'm not talking about my judgment!" rapped out Broiles, shifting his ground. "You threw away your fortune, rather than pay me what you owe me, and elected to go to jail. You were legally imprisoned for debt. Now I ask you, Misther Johnson, to do wan of two things: either pay me wan dollar in acknowledgment of your debt, or go back and serve out your sentence. If you refuse to do either I'll have martial law declared and come down and get you with soldiers."

"I won't pay you a cent!" declared Hard Winter grimly. "But, damn you!" he burst out—"if it will give you any satisfaction, I'll go back to jail!"

"Suit yourself," purred Broiles. "Wan or the other—I don't care which." And Hard Winter stood gazing at the ground.

"I'll go with him," he said at last, turning to Curly. "This place ain't home, any more. I'll go back to jail. But, Mike Broiles, I'll get you, yet. And I'll never pay you a cent."

"Vary well," agreed Broiles. "And I'll remember that threat. Johnny King, do you take him to Lincoln."

"Yes, and the rest of you fellers git!" ordered Curly peremptorily. "Out of camp—we don't want you around! Any skunk that will work for Mike Broiles can cook his own grub, out in the brush."

"Vary well for you, too," nodded Broiles, reining away. "I'm a man that niver forgets."

"Here, too," returned Curly. "I can remember Rustlers' Pass. So you'd better hit the wind, while you're lucky." He laid one hand on the butt of his pistol and Mike Broiles threw the spurs into his horse.

"The dadrammed murderer!" burst out Curly as he watched Broiles' precipitate departure. "What the devil is this country coming to, when a man like that can hold down a job as chief deputy? Well, he's downed poor old Hard Winter and now he's riding north to throw a scare into those JT boys."

"Yes, and the next man," predicted a warrior, "will be Colonel Jack Moore. Mike is out to break 'em all."

"We'll go down and see Jack," observed Curly. "It's all right, boys, to be a man of peace—but look what happened to Henry."

The cowboys ate and mounted grimly, throwing their beds over the spare horses which were driven along in their wake. Then like mercenaries of old they rode south to Deep Springs to offer their services to another cattle king. When they reined in at the old camping grounds the colonel came out to meet them, while a Mexican brought a side of beef.

"Good morning, boys," he greeted. "Just make yourselves at home." And he beckoned Curly off to one side.

"Have you heard the news from Lincoln?" he asked portentously. "Well, hell has broke loose. The sheriff is killed, and the soldiers have marched down from Fort Stanton."

"Who killed him?" demanded Curly eagerly; and the colonel drew down his brows.

"Tuffy Malone," he said. "Laid in wait and ambushed him, right there on the main street of Lincoln. Some grudge they had, over a killing up in the hills. And now Mike Broiles is chief deputy."

"I met the gentleman, up at the Crossing this morning," observed Curly nodding wisely, "and I thought he was badly swelled over something. Well, the break has come, Jack. Now what are you going to do about it? Lay down, like old Hard Winter, or stand up and fight 'em? I've got the men, right here!"

"I'm going to fight 'em!" answered Jack Moore harshly. "But not right now, Mr. Wells. They're fighting up in Lincoln—shooting it out from house to house—and already they've looted one store. Tuffy Malone and his Heel Flies have thrown in with one faction, and the rest of them have been mostly appointed deputies. It's going to be mighty unhealthy in that town for some time. Let the murdering rascals kill each other off."

"Suits me," agreed Curly. "But what about my boys, here? If we turn 'em loose now they'll ride up and join in on it, like an Irishman at the Donnybrook fair. On the other hand, colonel, it will cost you four dollars a day——"

"I'll pay it!" rapped out the colonel. "The money's nothing to me, compared to the cattle I'd lose. I'm fighting for a principle—and to protect my own property. But, of course, there's my promise to Julia."

"Aha!" grinned Curly. "So that's what's eating on you? Well, it won't be long, colonel—it won't be long. Mike Broiles went up this morning to pick a fight with the JTs—or that's the way we figure it out—and after he smokes them out he'll come down and tackle you—unless I'm a danged poor guesser."

"This has got to go beyond guessing!" declared Moore. "What I want is some accurate information, and I know how to get it, too. Do you remember that night when Honey McCoy found you, when you were wounded out on the flats? He told you, I suppose, that he's a seer, and all that—the Comanches always called him See Far. But as a matter of fact he's got some fine marine glasses—that explains how he sees at night."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Curly. "I wondered how he could find me. Say, that old man ain't so crazy, after all. He knows how to keep his mouth shut."

"That's it," nodded the colonel. "He's been of great service to me, both here and up at Lincoln. No, Honey isn't crazy—but the time has come, Curly, when I've got to get the goods on Mike Broiles. He's behind this whole business, and now he's in the saddle—undersheriff and in control of the government. It'll take more than hearsay to prove he's stealing my cattle. Can I trust you for a little night work?"

"With those glasses?" beamed Curly. "Getting the goods on Mike Broiles? Say, Jack, I'd work for nothing and board myself, to boot! I'll just stop at the wagon and say howdy to Melissa before——"

"The man that gets this job," spoke up Jack Moore implacably, "is going to start—right now!"

"Well, gimme the glasses, then," decided Curly promptly; and rode off alone, to the north.

To be continued next week.

The Man in the Grass

By Charles Tenney Jackson

Author of "Bubbles" Etc.

When an aviator made a forced parachute-jump in the Everglades, he had trouble in locating his very strange passenger.

A COMPLETE STORY

ELDRED got to his feet unsteadily in the long swath of the saw grass where the parachute had dragged him in the gusty wind up from Florida Straits. The stuff had cut him before he could free himself from the harness, but now the billowing silk chute had vanished over the brown green cane, and he could stare up breathlessly into the blue out of which he had jumped two thousand feet into this pathless jungle.

"Well, the old ship can be written off now. The chief'll be glad to hear it. She took it on the nose when she struck that mucky slough, and it's forty miles, I reckon, to the first road on the west coast. Wonder where Sarrett landed?"

He stumbled on a yard, suddenly aware that the giant Glade grass hid every landmark, presented a stiff serried wall of wind-rustled growth in every direction. The low sun alone gave him any sense of direction. Off that way lay the Gulf coast; but the airman had been crossing a corner of the south Glade jungle on his way from Cape Sable up to the Tampa airport where he was to turn the old plane in and quit the coast-guard service.

The engine had gone dead miles back and Eldred had figured on a long glide toward the shore country, till the ship had gone out of control in the gale for some unknown reason.

So he had told Sarrett to jump. Eldred himself had stuck to the ship till his mysterious passenger had got away. And Sarrett's parachute had opened to any easy descent, Eldred saw.

His guest on this last trip ought to be showing up somewhere, now, he thought.

"He sure couldn't be hurt. Easy-landin' stuff, I'll say!"

Eldred didn't dwell much upon this strange silence in the big grass until after he had done his parachute up in a rough pack and stowed it by a stunted myrtle at the edge of the dry slough he happened upon a few yards to the right. Then, when he started along this narrow, mud-cracked ditch between huge billows of the grass, he stopped to listen.

The natural thing for a man to do who had landed from the air half a mile, perhaps, from his luckless fellow-traveler, would be to shout till they located each other in this screen of grass.

"He can't be hurt. Last I saw he was making it easy. Drifted more westerly than I did. The ship tore into that muck slough, all right; but Sarrett came into the dry grass same as I did. Maybe he was just scared stiff. Over nothing at all. But for a fellow who'd never jumped from a plane he was mighty cool, I'll say!"

Eldred shouted twice somewhat irritably. This wind should carry his voice westerly toward where he had seen Sarrett's silk ballooning in the grass. Then he plunged on in that direction. Five yards from the mud-caked slough the going was tough. The stiff cane and the deep billows of saw grass, with newer growth stabbed up through it, made a barrier that he had to fight every step. And he could see nothing over it.

Half an hour later he had worked to a mucky cypress "strand" where the moss-grown little trees offered rest from the grim cane.

There the aviator rested and shouted again and again. No hail answered above the rustle of the wind in the grass. When Eldred crossed the strand and faced the jungle again he was wrathful.

"That guy could find me if he tried. Funny about Sarrett, anyhow. All the way up he was watchful. Looked like his eyes were burned trying to lamp all this country. And suspicious of me. I wonder what Mason asked me to put him in Tampa for?"

Anyhow, the chief would be glad to know they could write that old ship off. Mason had asked young Jim Eldred to turn it in at Tampa. After that Jim was free to go into the commercial-flying game which he was planning at Atlanta. He hadn't given two thoughts to Mason's request about the stranger, Sarrett.

"Queer bird, though. Something on his mind. Didn't want to mix. Wasn't till after we came up over the jungle back of Harney River that I noticed he seemed funny. Watched toward the coast line as if he had to fix every palm clump and cypress slough in mind. When I showed him we had to jump and had sixty seconds to make it, he smiled. First time, too. Swung off as if it was nothin' to him."

Eldred grumbled morosely. He would battle out of this pathless grass if it took him two days to make the west coast, which might be thirty miles away. Diamond-back rattlers on the myrtle ridges, and cottonmouths in the wet cypress strands. Dark coming on now; and a searing sun to-morrow. But he could make it to some coast conk's camp and then out to civilization.

But Sarrett? He couldn't go out and say he'd left a passenger vanished in the vast Glades unaided! And Sarrett had vanished. He might have been dragged hard and fainted or collided with some tougher growth of the grassy sea and been unable to call out. Yet seeking him, when Eldred could not find foothold anywhere for a view above the grass, was a slender gamble on luck. Then Eldred thought of the stunted cypress and went back to the strand.

He crawled up three feet on one limb-

less bole. In one spot he could see westward into the golden glare of sun. A mile away he glimpsed a brown hurricane-scuffed cabbage palm leaning over a blur of darker green.

"Anyhow, a ridge there. I got to camp till daybreak, somewhere. And if Sarrett has any sense he'd make for what timber he saw."

Jim Eldred slid down and studied the lay of the land. He had been along here just once. Nothing but leagues of grass, cabbage-palm islets here and there, the streaks of darker stuff that marked the cypress sloughs, and far to westward the misty stretches of Gulf coast along the Ten Thousand Islands, haunt of hidden men and lawless enterprise. Jim knew little of it himself. He had been on patrol the other way, toward Key Largo and the Straits, during his year's service. He had never put foot down in the Glade grass until this spill; from the air a man could not guess that it towered many feet above a traveler's head, and was, underfoot, an uncertain spread of slippery hummocks and broken, tangling cane.

He could see his own straggling trail behind him when he battled on toward the palm clump. Then he was barred by a sedgy slough and was an hour getting around it. The sun was down by then. When he glimpsed the palm tops again they were a hundred yards away in the warm dusk. He was parting the stiff grass barrier on the last struggle toward the low islet when a shout halted him.

Eldred swung about, wiping the stinging sweat from the saw-grass cuts on his cheek and forehead. A voice came distinctly from the half-hidden palm clump. Not Sarrett's deep tones, but high, nervous, excited snarling. Eldred didn't catch the words till Sarrett himself answered some abusive tirade.

"Put down the gun, Maney. I tell you I'm Sarrett—Bill Sarrett. You know me. Look, 'Cap'—nine years older, but you know me! You had a good look the night Marvin, the mail clerk, was killed. Put down your gun! I can't hurt you. Don't want to."

"Yeh come inteh the swamp trackin' me, that's what yeh done!"

"No. Just on a chance. I just got word of you last month. 'Old 'Steam' Larsen is out of the Texas pen. You know what it means!"

The other voice broke into a quaver of fear or anger. Slipping past a myrtle clump, Eldred saw the speaker now. A thin little old man with a gaunt, grizzled face staring at Sarrett in his leather coat and laced boots. A short shotgun was in the old man's hands, the muzzle wavering toward Sarrett's hips. But the swamper seemed stupefied by Sarrett's words.

"Out o' the pen? That devil, Steam Larsen—skipper o' the *Mary Beasley?* Out ag'in—how's that?"

"Paroled. He had influence somehow. I'm here because I wanted to warn you, Cap."

"Yeh! Warn me! Yeh came prowlin' after me same's the rest—to git wind o' that mail-car plunder that Jerry's gang took from the coast train and got to Matagorda Bay with. And then Larsen took it from 'em when they tried a get-away to sea. Crooks robbin' crooks—that's what!"

"You were one of Jerry's gang yourself, Maney." Sarrett's deep, quiet voice came clearly to Eldred, crouched under the myrtle.

The old conk snarled again. "All I done was hold horses the night they held up the mail. Jerry and the 'Wop' held guns to my head, made me go along with 'em. And I was the only one got away."

"And you tricked Steam himself in the end."

"What you talkin' of?" blustered the old man. The gun came higher, menacingly.

Sarrett raised his hand.

"Lay that off me. I been trying to find you ever since I got word from one of Jerry's men that you were living somewhere back in the Glades below Margo. Big piece of luck, this!"

"You never got in from the coast."

Sarrett laughed. "No, from the air. You never saw a plane go bump east of here? Or two parachutes come down beyond the slough?"

"I never saw nothin'," retorted Maney uneasily. "Them airmen foller the coast. They don't come in this far."

"The pilot is down somewhere, too. I shook him off, not caring for him to know this business. Not till that mail-car stuff is turned up."

"Never will be turned up. I don't know nothin' of it. When Steam took in Jerry and two o' his men, puttin' to sea with 'em, and then discovered they had all them bonds and cash, he landed 'em somewhere back on the Texas coast, where they was captured. But the money never did Steam any good. He was picked up for smugglin', and got ten years himself. The schooner was burned down the shore toward West Cape. His crew never got wind o' what he had took on board from Jerry Dringo. Not till too late."

"One of 'em did. That Greek sponger they called 'Joe.'

"Yes. He came into this swamp following you—and never turned up again. Cap, maybe you know about that?"

The gun shook before Sarrett's calm face. Eldred saw now that the gaunt swamper had but one leg. A rough peg churned the dirty shells of the low ridge as he blustered about in rage. Beyond him, all but hidden in the rusty cabbage palms, Eldred made out a thatched camp, a rough clay furnace and the drying frames of a conk trapper's usual hangout on the Glade islets.

"Don't know nothin' about it! They don't bother me. Only—Larsen out! That yeller-haired devil! Hooked up maybe with the rest o' Jerry's men now to find that plunder."

"That's it. Jerry Dringo escaped the pen a year ago. The rest got life, or just as good. Dringo, who robbed the mail, had to dicker with Larsen, who got hands on it and then lost it. They agreed to join and hunt it down, bad as they hate each other."

"Think I know somethin' of it, do they?"

The old swamper was shouting excitedly at Sarrett's convicting tones. But he faltered, the gun came butt down to the ground, as he burst into tirades against his old persecutors. Eldred could guess that nine years of fear had haunted him almost to madness. He had been thinking of a day of reckoning to come with Dringo's bandits, who had robbed the Texas coast mail train, or Larsen, the schoonerman, who must have some clew to the mystery. A fortune two crooks had missed!

Plain enough to Eldred that Sarrett had no more knowledge of it. But who was Sarrett? Why was he seeking Maney, the swamper?

Eldred crouched in the dusk and listened. Sarrett was on the long trail himself. Eldred got the idea that the air was no alien field to Sarrett. He had been up this coast before, but never so far inland as Eldred brought him from the Cape. Spying out this obscure refuge of a man who must have fled from Texas himself and hid out in the Florida swamps. And Sarrett did not want Eldred to know of this mission. Eldred started suddenly. Was that crash something that Sarrett had contrived, in order to land here when he spied Maney's refuge? But that was impossible.

Sarrett was trying to quiet the old man's doubts. The two finally went behind the dusky palm clump where Eldred saw a fire presently glowing faintly. The conk's grumblings came,

but he was reluctantly receiving Sarrett as an enforced guest.

Eldred hesitated. Mystery, death, seemed centering about the tiny island in the grassy sea. Sarrett did not want Eldred to interfere in the matter, evidently. And until Eldred was sure of Sarrett's purposes he determined not to disclose himself. He could work around the camp and strike some trail which must lead out from Maney's refuge westward to the coast. Sarrett would have to come out that way, in the end, and Eldred could decide on what to bring to the authorities. Perhaps Sarrett was a law officer?

If Captain Mason of the coast-guard station had known anything of Sarrett or his business he had kept it to himself. Taking the passenger was orders far as Eldred was concerned.

The airman kneeling in the dusk beyond the ridge studied the affair dubiously. Then he heard a crash of limbs. Sarrett had swung to one of the leaning palm trunks and was watching over the grass. Then he called back to the thatched camp.

"Funny about that pilot. I didn't see him land, for I was knocked out a bit. Heard him yell a couple of times, so he's not hurt. But unless he saw your camp he'd not turn this way. He'd hunt me beyond the slough and then strike west to get out of the jungle."

"Don't steer anybody here unless yeh want more trouble," rasped old Maney. "I ain't figgered yeh out yet, Sarrett. Yeh don't mean good to me no more'n the rest of 'em."

Sarrett climbed down and answered gruffly. "Well, I'm here for the night on you, Cap. We can talk over this deal. If Larsen and Jerry got together on this your life ain't worth a rat pelt."

The old man got excited again. "No? Joe the Greek come to make threats once. And yeh say he never got out the swamp ag'in!" His nervous laugh came. "If my dogs hadn't both got snake-bit this summer nobody'd ever creep on this camp like you did. So, mister, if you just disappeared, it'd be a puzzle, wouldn't it?"

"Come clean!" growled Sarrett, suddenly wrathful. "You can fix up that old Texas job right."

"And git life, mebbe? No! Nothin' to tell, anyhow. Well, pull up that chunk o' drift. We'll eat. Yeh think I'd be livin' the mis'able life of a swamper if I knowed where eighty thousand dollars in money was? Plum' blind foolish!"

Sarrett said no more of it. They talked of the camp fare. Eldred waited ten minutes, then started to break a way to the left.

He made around the tiny islet to the west and then heard Maney's excited voice in a faint shout. "Steam might be in any day, yeh tell me? Him and Jerry shore would bump yeh off as quick as they would me, Sarrett—don't forget that!"

Then Sarrett's low tones trying to quiet the old hermit.

"Crazy!" thought Eldred, as he felt a way through the saw grass. There would be a trail here. Maney must have exit to the trading hamlets on the edge of the great Glades. "I'll have to report on all this when I wire that the ship's cracked up."

The cool night wind took away his weariness as he struggled westward under the bright starlight. The grass billows were like the waves of the sea. And then he'd strike stiff, close, upright growth, where he had to force a passage. When he struck a dry mud-caked slough it was easier. And then, as he expected, he found the out-trail following this depression.

It was nothing but a dim, trampled mark, rarely used. When Eldred came to the end of the slough he discovered it twisting off in the big grass, merely a crushed, hummocky passage between dense walls. But not bad going. He

could cover a big distance to-night, if it was like this. Yet the old hummocks underfoot were tiring in the dark. He made a mile, perhaps, and then lounged back on the grass mat off the trail to rest in the utter swamp silence. Hardly a rustle of the grass in the fitful breeze, and a bit cool for the mosquitoes from the sedgy lakes of the autumn-dry Glades.

Eldred was lolling out there longer than he intended. So when a faint crash came in the grass, he stared back, wondering if Sarrett, after all, was taking the trail out to-night. Perhaps the testy old swamper had ordered him from the camp?

Then he whirled to watch toward the west. The noise became the steady, soft beat of horses' feet against the stubs of grass.

Eldred rolled over the first swath of stuff and crouched low. A moment more and the animals loomed against the stars. Three riders coming silently to pass him going on toward Maney's camp.

When they made the first turn Eldred swept out to the path and gazed after them, thinking.

"Funny again! This trail ain't traveled once a month, I'll bet. That first guy had a rifle in a shoulder sling. Not a word from 'em all! What's that Sarrett said? Larsen and some of the gang that Maney fears, now out of the Texas pen and bound to hunt the old man down? Must be—can't be any one else!"

He was breathing hard with excitement. Then he reflected that possibly the three riders were officers coming in on some clew of the mysterious old mail-car robbery Sarrett had told of to Maney, accusing him of a hand in it nine years ago.

Loot never recovered. A fortune in bonds stolen, and then lost on a get-away across the Gulf. A number of people might know of that, if there had been any talk since the bandits got freedom.

"Going back," muttered Eldred. "I don't know Sarrett's game but he'll get hurt there, if it's like it seems. Or else arrested. But maybe he's a crook himself, and due for a trip-up. Anyhow, I'm going to lay out and see what's doing."

He followed cautiously. At the beginning of the dry slough he halted, staring at the shadows of the myrtle and cypress clumps where the depression gave way to the last screen of grass before Maney's camp. The starlight was enough to see the vague dust the horses had stirred. Then he made out a movement, heard a thud of feet.

"They're tying the animals to that scrub stuff. Sure, no other place in the grass. They'll go in on foot."

He kept along the side of the slough, in and out among the mossy cypress stubs, till he saw the horses. Then he heard low voices in the first break of the grass trail beyond. Eldred crouched and listened till he was sure they had gone silently on. He did not know whether the trail ran straight or not to the palmy islet, for he himself had fought through the cane to the slough bank.

So Eldred went on, crouching, peering, listening at every twist of the rough path. Finally he thought it dangerous to keep on. If the riders had lawful business they would certainly go openly to Maney's camp. But he did not see them in the starlight ahead.

"They've cut out then, into the jungle," he muttered, "just like I did. Bad business. Wish I had a gun. Sarrett has, though. But a surprise attack —three against him? The old conk wouldn't be much in a fight. If Sarrett was only warned he'd be a bad man to tackle. I reckon the two have turned in under that thatch, tucked in the mosquito netting, if they got any."

He crouched off the trail and made

ten yards silently as he could; then peered through the parted cane, trying to make out the frowsy heads of the old palm trees so as to locate the shack.

But the breeze had sprung up and the rustling, waving tops of the giant grass against the stars made this impossible. So he crouched and crept, watchful of every step. If the skulkers were ex-cons of the old Dringo gang or Larsen's men there was no doubt what they would do to an interloper on their plans.

But Eldred crept on with a desperate resolve to find Sarrett. He might get a shot himself in the dark, if he could not identify himself quickly to the sleepers in the thatched camp. But it seemed the only chance. There would be a rush in the cane shortly to kill or capture old Cap Maney, without any doubt at all.

"They want to make him tell about that Texas loot," Eldred muttered. "If he don't know, it's his finish, anyway—for sure!"

He made another five yards to the shallow, open, mud-cracked slough which straggled between the big grass and the jungle of the ridge. He saw the palms now, and the darker object under them—Maney's thatched lean-to. No light there. The two disputants had turned in. It would puzzle a stranger to locate the exact camp.

Eldred watched each way ere he slipped across the dry slough. He sank under the myrtle scrub, wondering if the skulkers had seen him. Then a whisper startled him, coming from the grass he had just left.

"Easy there, Rod. His shack must be further down. Steam's makin' in there."

Eldred turned his head. A man had stepped out to the slough not twenty feet back of him. He had mistaken the aviator for one of his comrades and now followed the other's steps.

Eldred crouched deeper in the myrtle and raised a warning hand over his shoulder. The stranger came on to drop silently at his side. A big man, but his face was unrecognizable in the dark. He stretched out with his automatic not fifteen inches from Eldred's hand. Then he muttered, still staring ahead.

"Yer right, Roddy. That's the shack. Larsen'll come in from the other side. No talkin' now. The old buck must have dogs about."

Eldred grunted, watching out of the corner of his eyes. If the other man looked alongside he might discover the flyer's boots or some betraying sign. No hope of warning the sleepers in that flimsy shack now. Eldred drew back slowly to his knees. Then he swung over and came down swiftly on the stranger's back, his hands going about his neck to a desperate clutch at the throat.

This must be Dringo himself, if Larsen was down the slough. But Eldred could not tell. He choked the startled gasp to nothing.

But the sprawled man made a tremendous heave forward, dragging Eldred on his back. He dropped the gun and twisted, butting into the brush, threshing like a downed steer. Eldred was bulldogging him, twisting his head with one hand, throttling with the other, until, as they rolled out to the dried mud, Dringo's convulsive plunges became slower and weaker. His arms beat the dust and leaves, but he could not shake his burden.

Eldred choked coolly, deliberately, till the last struggle was over, then cautiously released his hands. Big Dringo slumped on his face in the dirt and lay still.

"Maybe I did him for good," muttered Eldred. But after watching his victim long he crawled to the edge of the ridge and fumbled about for Dringo's gun. When he pawed it out and crawled back to the open he felt better.

Two armed men were slipping up on the camp, but he was in shape to battle them now.

He crouched near Dringo's head, watching the starlit grass. If the others heard this struggle they did not know its meaning, for nobody came into the opening. Dringo was out for good. But Eldred did not trust him to stay so. He got the bandit's belt off and wound and buckled it about his nerveless arms. Then he got up and stole along the edge of the myrtle toward the palm clump.

"They must have a plan to take Cap by surprise. There was to be some signal before they closed on him. And they got me there—don't know their next move. Maybe Dringo was to take the lead."

He got to the first leaning palm and laid his body out upon the trunk. The thatched wall was not ten yards away. He could see the packed clay-and-shell space beyond it, where Maney's fire-pot was built. The gang couldn't cross this place unseen.

But this silence was disturbing. Enemies' eyes were close by.

Menace was heightened by the calm of the jungly little islet. The rustle of the palms over his head made Eldred start. He could break for the camp, but it might bring a volley from the others of Dringo's gang, or a blind attack from Sarrett and Maney, ere he could explain himself.

Eldred glanced up the leaning palm. It hung almost over the thatched lean-to. Once up there he might be in shape to watch beyond the little clearing. So he kneed and shoved up and out slowly, pausing for breath and to scan the ground. He made the rough, broken sheath of the palm head, drew a leg over a bunch of the dried fronds, and waited.

"Larsen can't think anything but that it's Dringo, even if he sees me," thought Eldred. "If only Jerry don't come out of his daze. Wish I could have gagged him, too. Anyhow, I can see a bit."

Some one had seen him! A figure stepped out into the dim starlight of the clearing beyond the thatch, stopped and stared over its low top. The move of the man up the tree evidently puzzled Larsen and the man they had called "Roddy." For another form came into the open. They both watched Eldred, who was hunched under the head of the leaning palm, almost over the camp.

Eldred was trying to guess Steam Larsen's mind. The one-time skipper of the smuggling schooner which had taken Dringo and his plunder aboard long ago and then betrayed the mail-car bandit, probably did not trust Dringo now. They were both free of prison and had been compelled to combine to trail down the lost plunder, but they would not trust each other.

So Eldred guessed that Steam was filled with suspicion of every move the supposed Dringo made. Maney had been one of Dringo's gang; they might now turn against Steam Larsen at the end.

Eldred was figuring this out. Larsen didn't know what to make of the man crouched on the little leaning palm. It might mean a treacherous nest for a sharpshooter to crack Larsen down after he had settled with old Maney. To come close under the tree and confer with the supposed Dringo, Larsen would have to tiptoe around the shack. Eldred saw the man called Roddy wave a vague hand, but the two did not advance.

Eldred felt trapped. He was as far from being able to warn Sarrett as he had been before. He could hardly make out the two plotters against the shadowy jungle; if a gun was whipped up on him he would not see it.

So the three were waiting tensely and puzzled, when Jerry Dringo stirred his dizzy head in the slough dust. Eldred heard a coughing grunt first, then

a mumble of curses. Dringo was butting about as he found his hands tied behind his back. Then he suddenly howled; it became a bull-like roar of anger and alarm as Dringo got to his feet and pitched about in the jungle.

Eldred did not notice what Larsen and his pal did. He swung his legs about the palm and jumped. Even as his feet struck the grass roof he heard a stirring beneath it. But his heavy boots broke through the stuff, he came straddle of a pole that cracked and pitched him to one side until he collided with a man's knees which had just swung out from a board bunk.

It would have been comical anywhere else. Eldred knew that Bill Sarrett was heaving up from the moss bed and grimy blankets, and that across the shack old Maney was yelling his panic.

"Sarrett! It's Eldred! Look out! Danger there at the door! Keep away!"

Sarrett was hurling him across the dirt floor. Then he leaped to his bunk for his pistol by the gunny-bag pillow.

Eldred clutched at the gun before Sarrett could raise it.

"Keep away from that door! Larsen's there—after you, Cap!"

"Eldred!" yelled Sarrett, "what's the matter? How you come——"

A spurt of orange light came in the door of the shack. Half of the roof was caved in by Eldred's descent. But old Maney had floundered from under it. Eldred saw him stump outside, his short shotgun in his hand while the two invaders across the clearing were pouring lead into the shack.

"Larsen!" yelled the swamper. "Larsen again! Might 'a' knowed! Come fer me, skipper, have yeh?"

The shotgun roared with a mighty burst of flame and smoke. Then the old man came reeling back into Eldred's arms. Sarrett was firing through the broken thatch wall. When Eldred shoved old Maney aside to join him, the sharp bark of the automatics still came from the edge of the jungle thirty feet away.

Bullets were cutting the dry thatch and snarling on the swamper's pots and kettles. But Maney had got to his feet again. He dodged past Eldred, stumped to his dooryard and again the double-barrel vomited black powder and flame into the face of the two marauders.

Eldred heard some one crash to the packed shells. He was trying to twist through the wrecked wall, when Sarrett spoke quietly:

"Nothing more. Cap put that fellow down. Eldred! What's up? What you doing raising this mess on us?"

"Tried to warn you. Larsen and Dringo——" gasped Eldred. "I met 'em coming in. Dringo's back in the slough, tied up."

"Dringo!" shouted Sarrett, "how did you ever hear of him! And Steam Larsen? Where did you get wind of this business?"

"Don't know a thing except what I heard you and Cap say!"

"Cap? Well, you know a lot, I guess." Sarrett had recovered his wonted calm. "Come here, Eldred. The old man's down. He rushed out there like a wild cat on his pegleg and took it face to face. Old grudge—him and Steam Larsen.

Eldred had gone around old Cap Maney, who was moving feebly by the door. There was another figure on the packed earth. Eldred bent over it closely, touched it, and then came back to Starrett.

"It's a big, yellow-haired guy; and I hate to say what Cap did to him. That ten-guage shotgun at twenty feet. It just don't look good—in the face, Sarrett!"

"Right," retorted Sarrett quietly. "Steam had it coming. A dirty killer for twenty years. Smuggler, dope runner, hijacker. What about the others?"

"The one they called Roddy must have jumped to the big grass. That's Dringo who was yelling his head off out there. He's quiet now. Tied up; but his whoops raised this bloody show. How's old Maney?"

Sarrett had found a lantern under the wreck of the roof. He lit it and came to the old swamper's side. Eldred, gun out, was roving the edge of the cleared space. When he came back Sarrett had laid the old man out on a torn blanket and was speaking to him in low tones.

The light showed Maney's grizzled, wondering face. He stared at Eldred, whom he had never seen before.

"It's all right, Cap," said Sarrett. "This bird saved you from something bad. Death—torture—that's what they'd have done to make you tell of where Dringo's mail-car loot went to."

"Don't know — nothin' — about — it ——" blustered Cap weakly.

"Yes you do," retorted Sarrett. "You're done for, Maney."

The old man relapsed into obstinate silence. Sarrett shook his shoulder firmly. But Maney's eyes closed and his jaws set grimly.

"He's done for, Sarrett," grunted Eldred. "Now, I don't see your game. You fooled me on a lot. I heard enough to understand that nine years ago Dringo robbed a mail car. He made a get-away to the Texas coast and then Larsen robbed him in turn. And then Larsen's schooner was burned, and Dringo went to the pen, just to escape this summer and hunt Maney down. Maney had been one of his men on the job."

"Right," said Sarrett evenly. "And little old Cap Maney was the man who burned Larsen's schooner. He got away from Texas and followed Larsen around the coast. Single-handed he boarded the ship down by West Cape and put 'em all to the bad. Killed two of Steam's crew and got away with the Dringo loot. Steam wasn't on board then, but the publicity of this mysterious affair got him picked up by the Federal authorities. He went up on a former smuggling charge, but not a word of this Texas mail-car business got into it. Maney had just vanished with the Dringo plunder and the rest of Dringo's gang never got word of him for years. And he's dying without revealing it!"

Sarrett got up and paced the distance from Steam Larsen's riddled body to Maney's side. Eldred saw his face was haggard.

"Sarrett, how do you figure in? I haven't got you yet!"

Sarrett came to him and spoke like a man crushed.

"I spent four years tracking this old fighter down. Now he's run out on me at the finish. I'm done for, myself."

"How done for? You were one of Dringo's old gang?"

Sarrett smiled with a twist of somber pain.

"You almost called the turn, Eldred. If you'd been in the Southwest, and not so young, nine years ago, you'd know of this Dringo business. I was accused of being one of his bandits. I was the mail clerk on that run the night he pulled the job. They said that I opened the doors to 'em—was in on the deal. The other clerk was killed. When some of Dringo's pals were tried, he framed me into it. I wasn't sent up; but for nine years I've lived under that cloud. I couldn't clear myself. This summer I got a clew to this old hermit's whereabouts just about the time Larsen and Dringo did. He buried himself well. I spent three months trying to find him. Your chief, Mason, knew what I was up to. He asked you to take me in your ship so I might verify some points I had—from the air."

"You certainly couldn't have brought the ship down here!"

"No——" smiled Sarrett. "But that's one of the funny ways things turn out. I saw the camp after your

engine went dead on you. No. I'm straight, Eldred—right through!"

He gripped Eldred's hand in his own. They heard another burst of curses from the stumbling bandit out in the cane.

"Let him be," said Eldred. "He can't get anywhere. So you came into make Maney reveal where the money went to?"

"Yes. And he's passin' out, stubborn to the last."

"Playing possum," retorted Eldred. "Bet anything. He's listening to you now. Maney! Snap up! Play the game square!"

The old man opened his eyes. He had been shot twice through the breast and his voice broke to a chuckling, weary gasp.

"I ain't—tellin' nothin'. I'm no squealer, boys——"

Sarrett had given him up. He watched stolidly as Eldred took Maney's worn hands.

"Cap," said Eldred, "I'm a stranger to you. Not interested except to square things up for another man whom you can clear. I say you're a dog-gone good man. Always was. That time you cleaned up the schooner, shot it out with Larsen's men, eh?"

Old Maney's blue eyes almost twinkled. "Yeh, I did that! It was a month after the mail-car job that I come around by train and boat and found where the *Mary Beasley* was lyin' in Whitewater Bay. I was a rarin' fool. Steam wasn't aboard, but the rest o' the thieves went overboard—except the two who fought me. I took the packages o' currency from where Steam hid 'em in his cabin; and then I fired her. In a way it was a good job for a lone old ranger who'd made his first bad break over in Texas with Dringo's men."

"You took to the Glades with the plunder. Why didn't you turn it back if you wanted to go straight?"

"Who said I wanted to go straight? I'd 'a' been sent up—mebbe hanged. Dringo'd 'a' framed me worse'n any one. Or his gang'd 'a' got me. And there was a young fellow dragged into this holdup same as I was, like a fool. Cantwell, his name was. He got away, but him and me swore we'd play square on that money if we ever got it away from Steam. I waited for him years, but he never showed up."

"Then you know where the money is, Cap."

The old man gasped weakly. "No! I gave Cantwell a thousand and took two, myself. Most of that is in a Tampa bank now. You boys can git it when I'm gone."

Eldred took his shoulders firmly. "Cap, you're lying. At the point of death, you're not playing square."

The old swamper got to one elbow and gasped defiance. "I'm playin' square with the only pal I had, Cantwell. He had a kid—he gave me its picture years ago!"

Sarrett and Eldred glanced at each other. The former mail clerk, who had rested nine years under the suspicion of crime, looked hopeless. He had given everything to this long search for redress.

"Square with a pal, eh? That's fine, Cap. But that fellow may be dead. Here's a living man to aid—Sarrett. Come clean!"

Maney laid back on the blanket, weaker now and staring at the faint streak of dawn over the pathless grass. Sarrett walked to the edge of the clearing.

"You're a damn good fightin' man," murmured Eldred. "But stubborn, that's it."

"Yeh. I'm stubborn. That's me. Swore I'd never touch that money till Cantwell turned up. I didn't need it, nohow. I was satisfied here, thinkin' I had the laugh on 'em. Two dirty bad men like Dringo and Larsen. Steam,

the cold, yeller devil! I got him in the end, didn't I?"

Eldred listened to the weak boasts. "You sure did. Hopped out in front of us to take their lead. Keep up your good record. Finish right, Maney."

The old man was silent. For a while Eldred thought he was dead; but when Sarrett came back he moved his head slowly.

"I want a bang-up buryin'," he announced. "Like this—you two boys plant me in the shells under that twisted oak. Only tree that looks like home on this strand. Set fire to this camp, and then go to Tampa. I want you two to celebrate this yere buryin' in town. I'll pay fer it. Likker up and drink to me. I'll pay fer it. Tell 'em a good man's gone."

Eldred checked a smile. Cap was roaring boasts and defiance again. The other man took his hands.

"We will. We'll buy a stone and set it up along the road somewhere and engrave it 'To a Good Man Gone.' But you make that stone good, Cap. And we'll pay for the bust-up you hanker for!"

Maney laughed with a twist of pain. Eldred was tickling his vanity. The airman smiled himself. "And if we get a clew to your pal's kid we'll treat it right. We're two square shooters, Cap."

The old conk was rambling again. "This yere Larsen—you drag him off this island o' mine and plant him. Don't want him near me. But bury me on the south side o' the oak. Close up to the big left root. Kind of a hole there now. The damn blackbirds sing in the top, and my dogs are planted right close."

"We'll do it, Cap. Put up a marker, too."

"Right by the oak, close to the big root—understand?"

"You bet!" Eldred gripped his hands again. The old man stared at him wide-eyed and then his eyes twinkled. He seemed grinning satisfiedly when suddenly he relaxed, slumped back.

"Gone?" queried Sarrett. "Well, I failed then. The old devil fooled us all. Stubborn, crazy pride, malice, or something. Pride that he licked the world on one point if he failed in all else."

"Funny kinks get in a man's mind when he's alone," said Eldred. "We'll lay Steam Larsen off the ridge and then round up Dringo and take him out on the horses. The county authorities can come in and investigate the facts. But first we'll plant Cap Maney as he said. There come his blackbirds with sunup. The old boy had some sentiment about his place. Years here, eh?"

They worked away at the tough shells and sandy clay. The big oak-root showed up; and the space they hollowed out beside it would just about take a shriveled little fighting man—if he was laid on his side, knees and elbows bent.

Sarrett was resting somberly on his pick, wiping the sweat from his brow, while Eldred shoveled in the two-foot hole. Then the airman called him with a chuckling laugh.

"Stubborn, eh? Square, maybe, also. Come here, Sarrett!"

He was dragging out old rotted sacking; and then weather-stained leather showed. There were two rusty, broken old hand bags, one of which Eldred broke open with his shovel. He tore away the tough paper wrapping of the packages within.

Sarrett dropped alongside with a gasp.

"The bonds, Eldred!" His hands worked at other wrappings. "Currency—hundreds and fifties, just as they came from the bank that shipped 'em, nine years ago!"

Another story by Charles Tenney Jackson will appear in an early issue.

Big Ben

By Edward Albert

Author of "Reekmylane," Etc.

To Dugald, the old Highlander, the mountain was a goddess who would fiercely demand a terrible price if mortals constructed their road there.

A COMPLETE STORY

IT had been there ever since mankind had trod this habitable globe —before the Saxons came, before the tread of the Roman legions sounded among these unpolluted hills; when man was a cave dweller and lived grubbily in skins. It had existed, perhaps, before the palms of immemorial glaciers had smoothed those summits clean. It dodged and wound, it dipped and stumbled; it took little summits and skirted morasses. Unquenchable, immortal, it wormed its way through the wilderness. It was the highway to the north.

Down in a capacious hollow, lodged between a series of boulders, was a cluster of tents, shacks, and caravans. At the time when this story opens a kind of enchantment lay upon the camp. What had recently been alive with industry was now dead and still, though engines, compounded of arms and elbows and hot breath, sulked in stony recesses. Picks and shovels lay about in idle sheaves. Beside a little portable office, which resembled a sentry box on tiny wheels, lolled a sleek automobile, the aristocrat of all that wheeled tribe. In this little office a young man was sitting, poring over a large, unfolded map.

He was a handsome young fellow, tall and not inelegant, his small, shapely head set well above his shoulders. If you had been able to see his eyes, you would at once have noticed their jolly color of blue. At this moment they were fixed upon the map with a puckered look of intense concentration. He was in his shirt sleeves, for the autumn evening was pleasantly warm. The

rest of him was clad in breeches and puttees; and he drew profusely at a large brier pipe.

"Hello, Steve," said another man, issuing from a near-by hut.

He was much older—old enough, indeed, to be the young man's father; not tall, but broad and prodigiously strong, of that hard, bony type that wears so well. His head, already whitening under its three score of friendly winters, sat low, almost upon his chest. His expression, though apparently austere, was actually benignant. He regarded the young man with ironic compassion.

"Saturday afternoon, Steve," said he, "and still fixed upon your labor. What ails you, boy?"

Steve raised a face flushed with vexation and perplexity.

"I know, Mr. Martin. But this new section's going to be the very devil."

Martin searched in his pocket for matches.

"I've been road-making," he said, "for forty years now, and every new section's always been the very devil. Sometimes I almost believe it."

"But it is! We've had an easy time so far, working up that simple bit of river valley. It's simply been a case of following the old road, bottoming it all the way, and widening it here and leveling it there. But that's ended now. We're now leaving the old road, and working out a track of our own, between the devil and the deep sea."

For some time the men, both smoking hard, looked speculatively upon the large-scale map, so long familiar to them both, but always alive with interest.

"Let's go and have another look at the new bit," said Martin. "Coming, Steve?"

"Rather. Shall we bring the map?"

"No. I'm fed up with the map; besides we know every scratch in the map. Come on, Steve."

Saturday, and not Sunday, was the day of peace in the different camps which lay scattered for a mile or two along the great new road. On that afternoon everything was almost eerily quiet. The tents were deserted; the field kitchens were still; hardly a man moved within the lines. Packed in motor trucks, all the navvies had gone down the road to the nearest village, miles away, that boasted a public house. That night there would be riotous scenes; to-morrow, Sunday, there would be washing, furtive gambling, and newspaper reading; but now there was a peace more than sabbatical.

The two engineers struck upward, passing the raw earth and flayed rock, and drifts of ready road metal. The old man slouched, holding his head low and well forward, but his gait had strength and purpose. The walk of the younger man revealed the high-stepping briskness of perfect health and mental balance.

A few hundred yards more and the new road suddenly tapered off into a primitive pathway—the ancient highway—that gave a quick half turn and struck up a valley that ran into the bosom of a great mountain. Straight ahead, where the new road was to go, lay the inviolable wilderness.

The foreground and middle distance consisted of a desolation of bogland. Here were no paths, but in their place lay black pools that mirrored successively the clouds of midday and the stars of midnight. Between the pools were tufts of cotton grass and bright-green patches belying their appearance of solidity. Here the raven came and the hoodie crow, and sometimes a strayed sheep from more hospitable regions. Always, too, the varying winds of the wilderness came with different accents. But man came not.

On the edge of this bogland rose abruptly an enormous mountain, rough

with scree, and dominating the country round. Rivers braided his bosom; glens bored his flanks, but nothing could diminish the stark immensity of his bulk.

On that pleasant evening even the desolation had its charm. The sky was bright, the air serene. The birds of mountain and moorland piped cheerily. To the northward the setting sun was staining the heavens in a pale wash of amber and gold.

The two men stood where the two roads diverged, gazing straight ahead across the bog. In that direction lay the newer centers of civilization, which so long had been crying out for this new link with the outer world.

"You were speaking of the devil and the deep sea," said Martin; and he pointed to the mountain. "There's your devil."

"And there's the deep sea," added Steve, pointing to the fenland. They continued to gaze, as men would regard some fierce, caged animals. The figure is not an entirely fanciful one, for to the engineers daily and hourly in conflict with the grimmest realities of existence the monsters of the wilderness were almost living and intelligent beings, which were to be grappled with and overcome.

"The best of the year's past," said Martin, "and the worst of the year's to come."

"What did MacRostie say?" asked Steve. MacRostie was one of the Great Ones, whose habitation was London, and whose duty it was to command the energies of humbler mortals.

"Oh, I argued with him for a bit. I said we might do repairs and maintenance during the winter and leave this bad bit till next spring. But he wouldn't hear of it; must have the new road for next summer. Tourist traffic; no end of them expected—Americans visiting the beauty spots of Scotland, what? Charry-bangs and Henery Fords."

He snorted, relit his pipe, and continued to stare. Then if you had followed his gaze, you would have noticed a procession of surveyor's poles, in their garishly striped jackets, strung out along the base of the mountain, keeping just clear of the flats. These marked the course of the new road. Above them, minatory, rose the mountain. Like so many other mountains similarly circumstanced in different parts of Scotland, he was called Beinn Mhor, which in our speech means Big Ben.

"I've some letters to write home," said Martin. "I've a wife and family to attend to." He looked quizzically upon the younger man. "You've neither, lucky you," he said. "And don't forget it."

"Not likely to," returned Steve, but more through habit than conviction.

"Yah!" retorted Martin—but there was no malice in his voice. "I said that once myself. You'll be the same as me one day. Cheerio, boy!"

"Cheerio!"

Left alone, the young man bore left along the ancient road that led into the roots of Big Ben. He was a born engineer, and loved his work—and magnificent work it was, opening up the wilderness to the wheels and feet of man. Yet that did not prevent him from loving this old road. Natural-born engineers had made it—the animals and men of the wild, who knew nothing of trigonometry, but who with infallible instinct flattened out gradients and turned the rough into smooth. It was so soothing, too, to tread the grassy stones of the track, and observe the lichened milestones, after he had grown so used to the staring raw excrescences that modern road-making always brings.

And there was another attraction,

too, bringing him along the ancient road. He had gone only a little way, though the valley was deepening and the road was steepening, when a melodious yodeling cry, clear and distant, brought him instantly to attention. A girl, short-skirted and tam-o'-shantered, was swiftly descending the heathery, boulder-clad slopes of Big Ben.

She was not alone. Beside her, and a little way ahead, was a tall fellow—amazingly tall, taking one stride to three of hers. His clothing was rough and shapeless, and his movements had the tireless grace of the animals of the wild. Rather flushed and nervous the young man stood waiting. She came up, breathless and excited. Her face was plump and dimpled. Her nose was the sweetest button of a nose, just sufficiently *retroussé* to give a comfortable seat to her prominent horn-rimmed spectacles.

Even before she spoke you might have guessed her to be American. The exaggerated nationality of her dress at least suggested something alien to the soil. Her short skirt was a tartan kilt; her hose and jumper were to match; and she wore brogues of a Highland pattern.

"Say, Steve, ain't I lucky?"

She held out her hand and showed him a couple of big, rough pebbles lying in the palm. He regarded them reverently.

"Jove!" he said. "Where did you get them?"

"Up there." She nodded toward the mountain. "They're real cairngorms, aren't they?"

"Sure thing," he answered fervently, delicately taking one of the grubby objects from her palm. "Did Dugald show you where?"

"Yes."

She beamed upon the Highlander. He was as lean as a lath, but in temper as strong as steel. His black beard was salted with gray, and so were his bushy brows, under which lurked two black eyes. His eyes had a curious cast in them, slight but unmistakable, and their sinister appearance was increased by their bright fugitive luster. His voice had a high, piercing, singsong quality.

"Good hunting, Dugald," said Steve jovially to him.

"Beinn Mhor," replied Dugald in the careful speech of one foreign to the English tongue, "she was after being good to us to-day."

"Who?" asked Steve.

"The Ben—she!"

"You mean 'he.'"

"It will be 'she' in my language."

"Oh, all right. I call him 'he.' And a monster he is."

Dugald's look of curious intense speculation never left Steve's face. He spoke with a simple fervency, his voice rising and falling with piercing insistence.

"And it is a cruel monster that she is, too, mashter. I have lived beside her, man and boy, these fifty years, and I know her, too—yes, and it's me that knows her, too. And a jealous monster she is, too—she hates strangers." He paused, looking darkly at Steve, who smiled. Observing this the Highlander went on with increasing vehemence: "Yes, mashter, she hates strangers. She has beaten me with her storms, and frozen me with her cold, and killed my sheep; and once—once she killed my wife. And she was a stranger from Ardnamurchan. Remember that, mashter."

Giving Steve another wild look, he stalked up the road, his head held aloft. His huge strides set them almost running after him.

"What did you worry him for?" whispered the girl, catching Steve by the arm. "He's been real queer today. Don't rattle him, there's a dear."

"What's wrong?" whispered Steve.

"Guess it's your new road that's got him on the raw."

"The road?"

"Sure thing. He saw it again from Big Ben this afternoon. Gee, and he was mad! I heard him going on muttering no end. He's been real queer since his wife was killed by Big Ben. A landslide wiped out his cottage and her, too."

"I hear he's looked upon as a kind of local fakir."

"He is; got second sight, and things. Dad says the locals consult him about spells, and cures, and foretelling the future. Watch he doesn't put a spell on your new road, Steve."

She laughed, trying to make her remark jocose. The young man laughed also, and in the innocent concord of mirth they forgot about Dugald MacNeish. In that blank wilderness of mountains the two young people had been drawn together almost irresistibly. She had the frankness of her age, sex and nationality, and he found these features very delectable.

Ruth MacCallum had been born in Philadelphia, whither her father, John MacCallum, the typical herd laddie of romance, had emigrated from Argyllshire. He had grown rich, in the way that herd laddies have, and had returned to the scenes of his youth.

With him came Ruth, burning with eagerness to see the places about which she had so long read, heard and dreamed. Her expectations had been fulfilled—even to the point of discovering her ideal of a young man romantically subduing the wilderness to his will.

Meanwhile, upon that enchanted evening they meekly followed the muttering Dugald MacNeish up the glen until it opened out into a wide, grassy valley circled by dark pines. There were even scrubby little patches of hay fields and potato crops. The river course widened and flattened, the water dimpling into pebbly flats or whirling into pools. On every side from the steep hills around, minor streams fell in cataracts, whose voices in rainy weather filled all the air with sound. Above all, dominating all, stood the bulk of Big Ben.

Shouldering up to a ruffle of dark trees, like a sheep cuddling into a hedge for shelter, was a tall, stone mansion house, built in the inevitable and hideous, baronial style. The field and the house were known conjointly as Ach na Cree, and all were the property of John MacCallum, of Philadelphia.

When the little party of three came to the parting of the ways, Dugald waited for the other two to catch up to him. His road now lay to the rear of the mansion, where he dwelt in a little stone cottage all alone. His expression was a curious blend of exaltation and sullenness.

"I'll be wishing the young lady a good night," said he, "and I'll be hoping she'll like the bonnie stones."

"Thanks, Dug," said the young lady in her most cheerful tones. "But why not wish the young gentleman a good night, too?"

"The young gentleman"—Dugald fixed his glittering eye upon Steve—"will be too clever a young gentleman to need the good wishes of a poor Highland gentleman."

"Not at all," said Steve politely.

"The young gentleman"—Dugald's voice ascended a few semitones to express his anger and contempt—"will be thinking he is very clever; but there will be one that will be more clever, surely." He raised a knobby fist, protruding from the end of a shrunken sleeve, and indicated the towering masses of Big Ben.

They were now so near the mountain that they saw only his knees and haunches, his head and shoulders being shrouded and unseen.

"She will be more clever, mashter. She has been here long, long before roads began, I tell you, and maybe she will have no roads now, I tell you." He paused for breath and emphasis, and they noticed a thin froth upon his lips. He seemed to swell in stature. His eyes were ecstatic, looking through them, as if he saw unmentionable things in his mind's eye. "Or, if she will let you have the road, mashter, *she will be paid the price.*"

The last words were uttered with thrilling significance. For a second he stood rigid, the light of inspiration shining upon his forehead. Then with a clap the light went out of him. From being a seer radiant with the divine efflatus within him, he became a poor, old, ill-clad, ignorant man. He shrank visibly, and with bowed shoulders he shambled away.

"Gee!" ejaculated Ruth in a breathless fashion. Then she added in a tone of relief: "Here's dad!"

Never in this world would you have taken John MacCallum to be a great millionaire. He looked like a fairly prosperous country joiner holidaying in his Sunday suit. In stature he was small and stooping, and his wizened old face, with its fringe of thin, white beard, was ill proportioned, almost ugly. Only when you caught a glimpse of the quiet, gray eyes, so keen and yet so kindly, did you begin to understand why he had become the man he was.

"Well, bairns," he said in the quiet Highland way that forty years in America could hardly diminish, "and what's the matter now?"

Half ashamed and half amused, the young folks volubly explained.

"But surely, dad," exclaimed Ruth, suddenly becoming aware in the midst of her story that John MacCallum was not responding to her words in the proper spirit of levity, "surely you don't *believe* this!"

"It is the way of my country," he said in his suppressed manner, "to give life and feeling to all created things. Why shouldn't they, now? Dugald MacNeish has lived upon this mountain; she has nursed him, giving him both meat and drink. She has smitten him by flood and tempest. His wife died under her, and he has been queerer ever since. Beinn Mhor is now all that he has left; she is his terror and his torment, his love and his mother, his devil and—his god."

There was silence for a moment.

"But, surely," broke out Steve, "educated people don't believe such things nowadays."

The old man's enigmatic smile deepened and saddened.

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"Surely, dad," repeated Ruth, "*you* don't believe these things?"

The smile withered under his beard. He lifted his bowed old head, and surveyed the majestic outlines of the mountain. In a moment he bent his head again as if the glory of the sight had quite vanquished him.

"I don't know," he repeated. "I don't know."

Next Monday the new stretch of road began in no man's land, between the devil and the deep sea. And that very day the weather broke.

The summer had been abnormally fine, full of delicious sunny days and pleasant evenings. The plenteous rivers had thinned, showing great rocks like protruding bones; the bog holes had been baked into black, peaty crusts; the marshy hollows had dried till the bog myrtle had shriveled in the unaccustomed draft. The heather had ripened full and warm and dry.

But what a change ensued! It was first noticeable in the behavior of the lord of the wilderness. Big Ben, long so marbly clear and divinely gentle,

drew his garments about him like an outraged deity and retired into a cloudy void as the rain fell in increasing volume. He developed a voice of terrifying compass—a voice compounded of falling water, of rushing wind, and of thundering waterfalls. The rivers rose magically. Water multiplied everywhere. Unsuspected springs of water endangered the completed stretches of road, and cataracts of water descended from the mountainside to sweep man's handiwork away. The welter of bogland became sodden, inapproachable.

As the days multiplied into weeks, there seemed to be no end to the intolerable weather. The rain was inexhaustible, the wind without end. Scarcely an hour of sun and drying air was vouchsafed to the toilers in the wilderness. But always, doggedly and dumbly, the road makers struggled on.

As for the projected stretch of road, the attempt appeared to be no better than an affront both to human intelligence and the outraged powers of nature. The engineers blasted a path along the mountain flank, and then torrents descended and scooped their work away. When they attempted to make bridges, the rivers rose and swept their uncompleted construction into nothing. During the brief spells of better weather Steve and his men toiled like ants to make progress; and then a day's violence on the part of Big Ben ended it all. It was heartbreaking, madden ing, diabolical; they wasted every oath they could think of upon the weather and that savage land—but they toiled on.

The roadside camps became intolerable, so the men were lodged in houses in the nearest village, and brought up in motor trucks for each day's work. If this had not been done, the laborers would have revolted in a body; as it was, they lost droves of men every week. Their morale, like the road over which they had spent so many weeks of bitter toil, was crumbling away.

With every day, too, the winter crept nearer; winter, that would bring further terrors of its own—black frost and pounding hail, and the smothering blanket of the snow. If autumn—mere autumn—were to be as dreadful as this, what would the winter be?

One day, in an interval in the downpour of the rain, a big, covered car came squelching and rocking down the old road from Ach na Cree. The vehicle moved like a ship at sea. Mud, sand, stones, and rain water bespattered it. At last it drew out upon the new road, stopped, and John MacCallum peered out to investigate.

A few rain-sodden tents stood limply; several more lay beaten flat. A number of caravans—ramshackle houses on wheels—lurked forlornly in quiet corners. A squad of workmen were scratching in a disconsolate manner at the ruins of the road. And then the old man saw Steve Winter approaching.

Steve was much changed. He looked old and careworn. His jaunty step and confident carriage were diminished. He had even ceased to shave, and his clothing showed signs of his prolonged conflict with wind and weather. His old burberry was black with mud.

"Howdy do, Mr. MacCallum?" asked Steve.

"Ruth's inside," replied Mr. MacCallum; and Steve, peering into the damp interior, saw the horn-rimmed glasses beneath the sou'wester.

"Beastly weather, isn't it?" he asked politely. "It's put years on me."

"How's Martin?" asked MacCallum. "You heard?"

"News," replied the old man with his quiet little smile, "runs fast in the Highlands. A premature, was it?"

"Yes, I've never known such a thing come near Martin before. He was canniness itself at the blasting; had his

wife and kids to think of, he always said."

"Is he bad?" asked Ruth.

Steve nodded. "Took him down to the Cottage Hospital. Bad thing."

He stood looking darkly up the valley, and at this moment both his friends noticed how worn and ill he looked.

It was not Ruth's way to beat about the bush.

"Say, Steve," said she, "we've been fair worried about the awful times you've been having. We've not seen you for weeks, and you living in a rotten old caravan. Dad wants you to come up this afternoon and take a few hours' holiday."

She did not say that she had put the idea into her father's head, though perhaps Steve, being by no means a dense young man, guessed it.

At any rate he flushed slightly under the grimy tan of his face, but none the less he shook his head decidedly.

"Sorry," he said. "Thanks. Can't leave my work, though."

The positive young lady slid out of the car and advanced upon him aggressively.

"Say, stranger," said she, "you've said that too often lately."

"Sorry," he replied doggedly. "I can't leave the work now that I'm alone. I've to do Martin's work now as well as my own. The weather's been pure hell. The men are grumbling, too —we can hardly keep them here, and I don't blame them. I sometimes think of chucking it myself. What's the use of doing work one day and seeing it smashed to pieces the next? Only this morning I thought of wiring MacRostie and asking him to call the whole show off—till next spring, anyhow."

Ruth's little hand gripped the soiled and sodden sleeve of his burberry.

"Steve, lad," said she, "where's your courage?"

"Courage!" he cried. "Courage! I've courage enough to face odds! I've courage enough to fight against fair natural obstacles—I've fought them off before now. But this isn't fair—it's devilish. There's something uncanny about the opposition we're up against!"

He stopped, his breath catching. For suddenly, as at a stroke of magic, the mists ahead of them—those dreadful mists that had so long blanketed the world—opened out into terrific deeps. The sun broke through. And, lastly, bright, terrible and infinitely remote, shaking his mighty shoulders clear, through a cleft in his cloudy panoply appeared Big Ben. Torrents streamed from him; but his colors, washed by the rain, glittered in the sunburst.

"There!" cried Steve. "There's the devil that's trumping our suit every time. D'you remember what Dugald MacNeish said? Gosh, I'm half inclined to believe him."

"It's high time, laddie," said MacCallum in his quiet voice, "you did take a holiday. You'd better come with us, and have a decent bath and a shave, and a quiet meal. Forget this dirt and wet and worry for an hour or two."

Steve hardly listened, for, as the old man was speaking Big Ben drew his mists once more about him. Just as he disappeared, the sun flickered brilliantly about his head. It looked like a jeering smile.

Coming back to earth level, Steve was aware of the look of open concern in Ruth's face, and of the intentness on the part of her father.

"Sorry," he stammered, "very sorry. I'm a bit washed out, I'm afraid."

"Then be a wise laddie and come with us," urged Mr. MacCallum.

For a second Steve hesitated further.

"Thanks," he said at length; "I'll come."

A hot bath, a shave, and a good meal absorbed by way of a civilized table

and civilized dishes, worked wonders with Steve. He felt almost himself again as he sat by a huge log fire in the one comfortable room in the house.

In spite of its imposing exterior the mansion of Ach na Cree was a cold and uncomfortable habitation. It consisted chiefly of immensely thick walls and innumerable corridors and staircases, damp and stone cold. The bedrooms, though numerous, were cheerless, and smelled mustily no matter how much they were aired. The dining room, in spite of its great size and impressive oak paneling, seemed no better than a cavern. One room alone was worthy of the house and its surroundings, and Mr. MacCallum, who was innocent of the vanity of drawing-rooms, turned it into a general living room. Here was abundance of cozy armchairs and skin rugs. Antlered heads hung upon the walls; blackened oaken beams laced the roof; the ancient fireplace held nearly a cartload of wood.

Here the three were comfortably lodged. MacCallum with his cherished pipe and Steve with his cigarette. Ruth did not smoke, holding that it was old-fashioned for girls to smoke. No matter what subject they discussed—and the talk drifted perfunctorily over many topics—it always returned to that of the weather.

"Aye," said MacCallum—and in the domestic atmosphere of his fireside he reverted more and more to his Scottish speech, "it'll spoil our sport, just as it's spoiled our work. Ever since the season opened, the deer stalking's been a complete failure. We've never had a day out on the hill."

"Say, dad," said Ruth, "that's no hardship to me. I love the deer too much to want to shoot them."

"That may be, lassie. But"—he sighed and looked around—"when I was a boy about here I always thought what a fine thing it would be to have a bonnie house such as this, and to go out shooting just like one of the gentry. I'd like to do it, just for once, you know. And it looks as if we'd never have a chance now this year, anyhow. The back-end of the year—the fall, as you'd say, Ruth—is well on now, lassie."

A knock came to the door, and a neat housemaid—Mr. MacCallum disliked having male servants about the house—announced "Mr. MacNeish." The three looked at each other in astonishment; and then appeared the form of Dugald, long and lank and grim. He advanced into the center of the room, twiddling his rough tweed bonnet between his hands. He had no eyes for Steve.

"Mr. MacCallum," he said, "I'm thinking it will be a good day for the hill to-morrow."

"To-morrow," repeated his employer, astonished. "Why, Dugald, man, the weather——"

"The weather," said Dugald, "will be all right. I have been watching the Ben, and she says it will be all right to-morrow."

"But how——"

"I have watched her!" interrupted the Highlander so fiercely that they were intimidated into silence. "She is clearing now, and she says it will be all right to-morrow."

"All right," said MacCallum. "We'll trust you for that, Dugald man."

And then the eyes of Dugald and Steve met. The young man's expressed resentful defiance; whereas those of the Highlander began to glow with unearthly fire.

"Well, Dugald," said Steve slowly, "you've heard the news: Mr. Martin has been badly injured."

"Yes," replied Dugald, his voice quivering. "I am after hearing the news."

"And do you remember, Dugald"—the young man's voice was deep and

stern—"what you told me about Big Ben: that he will be paid his price?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well"—Steve tried to make his question appear jocular, but failed completely—"have we paid the price?"

Dugald gave him a searching look, wondering whether Steve meant the question to be answered seriously. The tone in which he made the reply left his hearers in no doubt as to his sincerity.

"The young gentleman," said Dugald clearly, "is after asking me if she has been paid the price. I will say she has not been paid the price. I wish the young gentleman good evening."

Giving the three listeners a fiery look, he turned and stalked from the room.

The next day was a tribute to Dugald's skill as a weather prophet. For the first time in weeks the morning broke bright and fair. Big Ben stood clear from base to summit, smiling a heavenly smile. The low country reeked with moisture, but the uplands were already beginning to dry in the heat. The heather purpling the higher slopes was a treasure for the eye.

At last smiles and a cheerful alacrity were rife among the road makers. Ever optimistic, they began to think that their troubles were over. The human navvies turned to with a will, the steam navvies clanked and puffed in unison. The contractor, beaming, arrived from Glasgow, bearing messages of encouragement.

"Good weather now," chuckled the contractor, rubbing his hands. "I've never seen Big Ben so clear."

Steve, busy with his plane table, looked upward at the monster towering over them.

"Yes," he said, "*very* clear. Too clear, maybe."

"Oh, stow it!" retorted the other. "I'll bet you a dollar that within a month you will have put him almost out of sight."

"I wish he was. I tell you, he's getting on my nerves, is Big Ben. I've had too much of him lately. When he's hull-down over my horizon, I'll—I'll—I don't know what I'll do."

So all day long they wrought, pushing onward between the fenland and the mountain. All that day Big Ben stood high and serene, jeweled against the unclouded sky. Then, about mid-afternoon, came the first note of change.

"Say, boss," said one of the navvies, a big, hairy Irishman from Galway, "see the Ben now?"

Steve, who had been busy at the man's elbow, turned to look. One glance was sufficient to send his heart into his boots. Mists were creeping round Big Ben's head; clouds were scarfing his shoulders; cumulus was piling up behind him.

"He's a foine weatherglass, is Big Ben," said the navvy. "And I'm thinking that means a change."

"A change!" groaned Steve. "A change! It's only a change to the same old thing."

Within half an hour the heavens had closed upon them. Their day's work done, the navvies were trudging back to their quarters, sick and sodden. If their tempers were again at breaking point, what should Steve's have been?

That evening as he cooked his solitary meal over his stove in the caravan he heard the wind rising. Along with darkness came a mightier downpour of rain. Upon Big Ben he heard the cataracts roaring. His caravan, drumming with the rain, began now to rock with the rising wind. His lamp bobbed and flared.

"A wee bit worse than usual, that's all," he said savagely to himself. It was tea time, but he was not hungry. More to pass the time than for any practical necessity, he sat toasting

bread at the stove. It was a warm and soothing occupation, and he needed both warmth and consolation. A disturbing thought which had been lurking at the back of his mind ever since the weather had worsened, suddenly emerged and became prominent. "Hope the MacCallums are all right. They were going out on the hill to-day." Another consideration canceled his uneasiness. "Well, they've that old blackguard Dugald with them. Curse him and his Big Ben——"

Feeling very lonely and miserable, he was glad to creep into his bunk long before his usual hour. In the darkness he lay listening to the elemental noises outside. It was almost like being at sea—a great wind, the dashing of waters, and the wide darkness all around. He must have dozed, for all at once it appeared to him that he was at sea, and upon a dark and perilous ocean. His ship was rushing upon a rocky coast—he could just make out the milky horror of the breakers. People on shore were waving lights and calling to him. *Crash!* went the ship upon the cliffs—and he awoke.

Somebody outside was calling to him —calling in impatience and alarm, and knocking loudly upon the door. The caravan shivered to the knocking, as it did also to the rain and the wind, which were thundering unabated. Outside also other lights were moving and other voices were calling.

Clicking on his flash light, Steve jumped to the door and flung the door open. A blast of wind and rain knocked the breath out of him; and then he saw Young, the chauffeur from Ach na Cree, standing with a lantern in his hand. His oilskin, gleaming with moisture, made him look like a seal newly emerged from the ocean. Young's face was very white in the light of Steve's torch.

"Sorry, sir," his voice came piping forlornly across the storm. "I was taking the car down to the police station when I thought I'd stop and see you."

Here the wind gave a mighty gust, so that Steve, to save his property from destruction, drew the man and his lantern inside and shut the door. Young stood trembling and dripping. As for Steve, he was trembling, too. A mountain of apprehension as large as Big Ben had suddenly risen up and blackened him with its chill shadow.

"What's wrong?" he asked, trying to keep his voice cool.

"Mr. MacCallum and Miss Ruth's still out on the hill. They haven't come back."

Steve knew it; knew it before his ears had gathered in the man's words. He had known it subconsciously ever since the afternoon had blackened over Big Ben. Yet, in spite of this subconscious premonition, the actuality struck him with stupefying force. For a few seconds he stood mute and trembling. Then, awfully and irresistibly, another submerged emotion rose to the surface of his mind. He remembered the words of Dugald MacNeish—if they had ever been far from his mind during the last calamitous weeks: *She will be paid the price—she will be paid——"*

Another specter, like one more in that dreadful procession of phantoms of the witch cavern in "Macbeth," stalked across the stage of his consciousness: *Was this the price that was to be paid?*

All this took only a second to happen. Almost immediately he began to astonish himself by the cool way he asked questions.

"Where's Dugald MacNeish?"

"He's out with them—all three's lost, sir."

Steve began to pull on his clothes, not observing what he did.

" 'Tisn't like Dugald to be caught on the hill," he said as he drew on his boots; the chauffeur all the while re-

garding him in a trembling muddle of fear and bewilderment.

"No, sir, but the storm came on awful sudden; and the day was so clear before."

"Yes," said Steve, grimly, "I saw that." Then suddenly his curious crust of immobility flaked and fell apart. "Man, alive, don't stand and look at me like that! Go and do something! Don't you see that it'll be the death of her to be out in the mountain during a night like this?"

Nevertheless, it soon appeared to Steve as well as to everybody else that little could be done until the coming of daylight. Young drove in haste to the nearest village to summon expert local assistance. Steve beat up his own men, and with the fine strain of unselfishness that so often appears in an emergency, they responded cheerfully to his call. The young engineer packed them into his motor trucks and set off through the night and storm to Ach na Cree.

Steve found the house lit and astir. In answer to his questions, several scared women servants gave him what meager details they knew regarding the declared intentions of the stalking party. Dugald alone had gone with them; Dugald hated large parties while stalking. The group of three had made for the northwest shoulder—the steep one. They had departed in high spirits, and when last seen from the house had been moving briskly, Dugald carrying Miss Ruth's rifle. The servants had lit a flare and fired guns, but to no effect.

So the young engineer was condemned to two hours of inaction. The time was not wasted, for Young turned up with a carload of shepherds and gillies, who sat knee-deep in collie dogs. The local doctor had also been warned and would be here soon. With Scottish caution all sat down to a plain substantial meal of tea and buttered scones, waiting till the dawn should come.

As they marshaled themselves in preparation for their journey upon the mountain, Big Ben favored them with another ironic whimsy. The wind changed direction, and with marvelous celerity the universe of mist split in half, and there he stood, sun-clear and enormous.

Steve's tongue could not utter the thoughts that now rose in him; like all other foul and pitiless deities, the monster had demanded the fairest and dearest of victims for sacrifice. Where was she now, that sweetest and dearest of his heart's desires?

In a long line, and spaced at equal intervals apart, the rescuers advanced over the northwest shoulder of Big Ben. The ground was sodden and the heather drenched them. In a short time they were wet almost to the waist, so that further moisture did not matter. They crossed the shoulder, dropping the mansion house out of sight, and so they came to the high, cliffy flank that looked toward the sunset. They saw nothing that mattered, save a few red deer dotting the remote horizon; above them an eagle breasted the mountain breeze. Two ravens croaked distantly, and the sun grew higher and hot. The heat haze began to shiver around them. The searchers, having refreshed themselves at midday, swung half right, and swept another flank of the hill. How wide that hill was! How wide and cruel!

About three o'clock in the afternoon a sharp-eyed boy noticed something lying at the foot of a little cliff, huddled between two mighty stones, and almost underneath one of them. The yell that he gave drew upon him the attention of everybody within half a mile; among them, plunging up mad with impatience and misgiving, was Steve.

Already a little group was gathered

round something upon the ground, stooping over it. He flung them apart. It was Ruth.

She lay motionless and senseless, half under the shelter of the great stone, and carefully covered with her own waterproof and that of her father. A rough tweed jacket—Dugald's, it was said—was under her head. The rain had driven under the waterproofs, which had been partly displaced by the wind, and her clothes were sodden. She wore no hat, and her hair was damp. Her face was like paper, and her teeth were showing.

For one unforgetable moment he stood looking down at her, while a tiny, red devil whispered somewhere in the back of his brain: *"The price—she has been paid the price——"*

He was on his knees beside her, when—"She is not dead," said a big, grave mountaineer. "It is only senseless she is—— What is that?"

A loud cry, diminished by distance, from another part of the hill. Another boy came running with the news that Mr. MacCallum had been found.

"Mr. MacCallum?" cried Steve, looking up. "Or his body?"

The boy could not tell; he would go and see. But here they were coming.

They brought up their burden on a rude stretcher, composed of coats and sticks, and placed it beside Ruth. It was MacCallum, hatless, drenched, muddied, and at the last stage of exhaustion—but alive!

He was conscious, even. They saw him move his lips and hands. So they gave him brandy and massaged his limbs, and he managed to speak.

"Ruth?" he muttered.

By this time the girl, still unconscious, had been wrapped in blankets and had been given brandy. A big bruise stained the back of her head.

"She's all right," replied Steve, in answer to the old man's question. "We'll get both of you safe home."

MacCallum nodded feebly, and, leaning back, closed his eyes. Then, after a brief pause, he reopened them.

"Dugald?" he whispered.

"Where is he?" asked Steve. Comprehending the question, MacCallum strove wildly to answer:

"Better give him some more brandy, sir," suggested Young.

More brandy was administered. Then, as Steve and the others bent eagerly to listen, they heard in broken phrases the story of the catastrophe of the day before. The grassy edge had mysteriously given way and Ruth had fallen down the cliff—injured—senseless. MacCallum had been left to look after his daughter—Dugald set off to obtain help—storm had descended upon them — darkness — rain — MacCallum had watched by his daughter all night, in unspeakable torment of body and mind—had set out at daylight to bring help—and fallen exhausted——

"What direction did Dugald take?" asked Steve.

MacCallum, raising his head, took a good look round, gathered his wits together, and then indicated the direction. Exhausted by the effort both of speech and action, he fell back limply.

"We'll have to get them home," said Steve.

So another stretcher was improvised for Ruth, and the bearer parties set off. But before they started, MacCallum opened his eyes, and the feeble smile he gave, drew Steve to his side. The young man leaned low to catch the words.

"Go and look for Dugald. Ask him if the Big Ben has been paid yet."

They found Dugald on the other side of the mountain, clean out of the track for home. It looked as if that seasoned mountaineer had been stricken mad or blind by the terror of the unexpected storm. He was bruised, battered, his clothing torn in ribbons, his

strength and senses gone. He was just breathing when they found him and carried him—the third of a sorry succession—to his cottage at Ach na Cree. And aged Gaelic women, native to his speech and acquainted with his ways, looked after him in his loneliness.

It was a marvelous thing that this man, presumably the strongest and most seasoned of the three, should have suffered most. Within a day or two Ruth and her father recovered sufficiently to remove all anxiety on their behalf. On the other hand, Dugald rapidly grew worse. His strength recovered a little, but violent fever shook him; his mind, at no time very clear or steady, became completely deranged. He talked of strange things.

And with the fall of the year the weather grew clear and tranquil. Big Ben was at peace. Underneath his shadow the life of a man was flickering out into the darkness; and Big Ben inscrutably looked on.

One evening, about a fortnight after the accident, the Highland nurse came to the sitting room where father and daughter, by this time nearly recovered, were sitting by the great fire. Steve was tenderly solicitous.

In an agitated manner the old woman began to address Mr. MacCallum in Gaelic, and the old man listened eagerly. His expression also grew deeply concerned.

"I fear Dugald is near the end now," he said. "He wants to speak with us." Here the old woman spoke again.

"With the three of us," added Mr. MacCallum. "He particularly wants the three of us. It is lucky, Steve, you happened to be here."

Dugald was lying in the box bed in the "ben" or interior room of his two-room cottage. His great length, prodigious before, seemed extended beyond all measure in the tiny room. His face was wasted to the bone, and his hair had whitened. He lay absolutely still, and they saw him only in profile.

He was too weak to raise his head, or even to turn it, but something in his face told them that he knew they were there. His lips moved and sounds came from them.

The nurse leaned over, listened, and beckoned to Mr. MacCallum who advanced and imitated her actions. Again the poor lips moved, and they thought they saw him smile. There came a pause—quite an appreciable pause—a strange, loud gurgle burst from his lips, and his jaw slackened and dropped. The nurse began gently to push them from the room.

They did not say a word till they had returned to the fire; and even for a long time after that they remained silent. At length Mr. MacCallum spoke as if in reply to a recent question.

"He spoke in the Gaelic tongue," he said. "He said to me: *'Have no fear now. She has been paid her price.'*"

And so it seemed. Dugald, the old and wise, had been claimed as a price in place of the young and beautiful. Big Ben had been generous, after all. Henceforth, without pause and without haste, the road clove its way through the wilderness. Next year saw it finished, and motor cars, oblivious of the blood and tears that had gone to the making of it, sped heedlessly along. Steve Winter was happy; for who can be otherwise when he sees a long-desired deed well done?

He had another reason for satisfaction, too. If upon one day of that same summer you had happened to read a marriage notice in *The Scotsman* you would have known the reason why. The notice also said: "Philadelphia papers please copy."

Another story by Edward Albert will appear in a future issue.

A Chat With You

THOSE who live in Alaska, British Columbia, California, Nevada or half a dozen Western States and are naturally fond of the outdoors are inclined to consider the whole East as an assembly of overpopulated towns and cities. But the wide-open spaces are not all in the West. Ontario and Quebec have spaces wide and open enough for the most untamed man. Looking west from the tops of the White Mountains over toward the Franconians, one may see a virgin forest utterly unspoiled by man, appearing just as it did when Columbus landed at San Salvador. Which calls to mind the fact that Clay Perry has written a stirring and altogether interesting novel with a setting in the Eastern woods. It is called "Wild Poison." It will appear complete in the issue of next week. We recommend it without reservation.

* * * *

JOHN E. BARNETT of Maryland, writes:

"THE POPULAR is certainly 'top of the world' as far as writers and stories are concerned. But what about the serial feature? I must congratulate you on the full-length stories published complete in the single issue. They are wonderfully educational and interesting. These words fill several volumes, the peak of every editor's desire—and your new POPULAR includes everything they describe. Give your readers a chance to voice their opinions on serials."

Certainly we will give them a chance to voice their opinions on any matter connected with the magazine. The great bulk of the material contained in any issue of POPULAR consists of novels or stories complete in that single issue. At the same time there are tales too long to be read at a single sitting and yet too good to miss. No one would consider it wise to sit up for thirty-six hours reading a story. And yet some stories, that we would be most unwilling to have you miss, will take that long in the reading.

We give them to you in four parts. One month completes the tale. It used to be that magazines came out but once a month.

* * * *

HERE is a friendly voice from the far Northwest. Mr. F. M. Drake of Oregon writes:

"I used to read THE POPULAR from cover to cover within forty-five hours after its arrival, but don't any more. Nope! Not since that unlucky day when my wife, not having anything to read, picked up a copy and read a few stories. Since that foul day I read the latest copy of THE POPULAR *later*.

"Is there no way I can buy the magazine as twins?

"This goes to show that POPULAR is not purely a man's magazine but appeals to the womenfolks as well. If they once get a start, look out, you fellows; you will still be reading the magazine, but later, much later.

"Anyway, I am for you and to show you that I appreciate good reading I even read Chats With You in the back of the book."

There is a compliment in that final sentence, although that word "even" puts a little sting into it. However, as long as he likes the magazine he cannot hurt our feelings. We have read of roses without thorns but have never found one.

DANE COOLIDGE is at work on another novel of the real West. He writes us:

"Every man has his clientele and mine is with POPULAR. It seems to me that I am in mighty good company when I horn in with Chisholm and Sinclair and all the old POPULAR bunch. One of the reasons is that they know what they are talking about and don't just take a shot in the arm and sling off something awful. This last of mine is a wild-horse story in Death Valley. I've got the whole history of Death Valley woven into it, and a golden stallion to boot."

SPEAKING of the outdoor life there is no species of athletics which calls for more stamina and grit in a man than rowing. You can't fake it. You must put your back and shoulders into the stroke and you must stay with it. Lungs and heart, back, arms and legs must all be at their best. It is emphatically a strong man's game. The most interesting rowing events, the hardest fought have been in the East, notably on the Hudson. Crews from California as well as the East are there. [illegible] William Hemmingway, himself a great oarsman and a great authority, tell you something about it.

THE POPULAR

In the Next Issue, June 2, 1928

Other Stories by Favorite Authors.

H A V E A

C A M E L

The cigarette that's liked for itself

It is sheer enjoyment of smoking that has made Camel the most popular cigarette of all time. Nothing takes the place of fragrant, mellow tobaccos.