

TWICE-A-MONTH

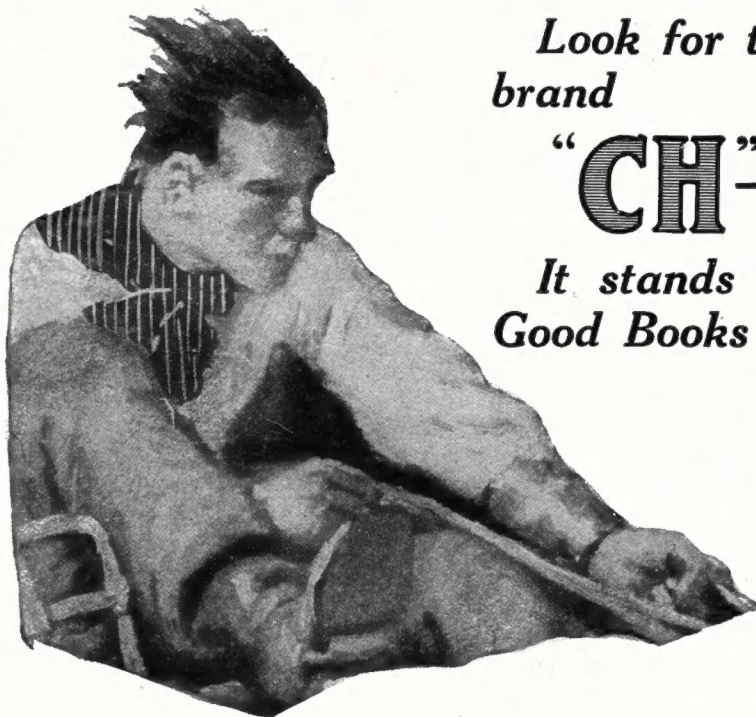
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Top-Notch Magazine

JULY 15, 1925

JUST PARDS, *Gripping Western Novel*
BY RALPH BOSTON





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TOP-NOTCH

TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

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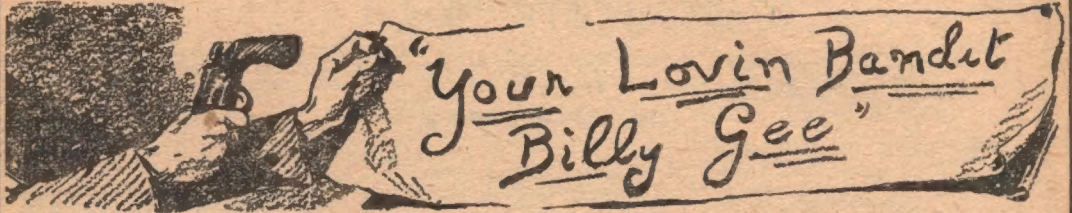
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Just Pard-

By Ralph Boston

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

THE MESSAGE ON THE DOOR.

AS silently as a sidewinder, Augustus Purdy crawled through the tangled mesquite bushes. There was ugly rage in his heart and an ugly look in his sun-browned face—an ugliness all very foreign to Purdy in his normal mood; but this black emotion had been growing in him for three whole days, and it had reached a point where an explosion was absolutely necessary. He had to have a show-down with Steve, and Steve himself was furnishing the opportunity.

"Tryin' to steal a march on me, eh?" Purdy was saying to himself, venomously. "Well, not this afternoon—not *this* afternoon! I'll show him!"

Star, the one horse belonging to the two partners, was under saddle and standing, with bridle reins trailing from the bit, at the door of the shack. Steve Willing was inside the one-roomed house

—rummaging around, if Purdy could believe his ears.

"What in Sam Hill do you suppose he's lookin' for?" Purdy was asking himself as he came to a halt in a brush clump within a dozen feet of Star.

After another long minute of hurried steps and thumps of roughly handled furniture in the shack, a tall figure emerged into view. Willing had shifted from his rubber boots and mud-smearing work clothes into his oxfords and town regalia. A fine figure of a man he was, too. Purdy had always said that about Willing, but he was neither saying it nor thinking it on this particular afternoon.

Hanging by its strap from Willing's shoulder was the partnership water canteen; and swung in the hollow of his left arm was the partnership rifle; and girdling his waist was the partnership belt, all the fluted pockets crowded with partnership ammunition. He moved to the horse, hung the canteen from the saddle horn, lifted, the trailing reins, and

pushed one foot into the stirrup. Then a hard voice gave him pause.

"No; you don't, Steve! Back up! Get away from that Star horse!"

Nothing ever seemed to fluster Willing; and he wasn't flustered now, although the way his foot dropped from the stirrup was ample evidence of his surprise. He turned slowly to take note of Purdy, popping out of the brush like a jack-in-the-box, a revolver leveled and a glittering gray eye trained across the sights.

"Well," remarked Willing casually, "so you had the six-gun, Gus! No wonder I couldn't find it."

These were the first words the two partners had exchanged in three days. Enforced silence of that sort is wearing on the nerves. Two men, twenty miles from nowhere, living in the same shack, eating at the same table, working in the same placings, and yet struggling to ignore each other! Certainly it frets the nerves, especially when two such men are brothers under the skin and business partners. Something just had to "break"—and now it was breaking.

"I corralled the six-shooter, Steve," remarked Purdy, "in order to be ready for you if you came at me with the rifle. I was plumb willin' to give you the advantage of range and offset it by bein' a little quicker on the draw. It was a toss-up, and I wanted to be square with you."

Willing stepped backward and leaned against the wall of the shack. There was something in his blue eyes, something that seemed almost like a look of humiliation, as he stood leaning against the dingy wall and staring at Purdy.

"Have you gone crazy, Gus?" he demanded. "Did you think for a minute that I could ever take a shot at you?"

"The way things are goin'," barked Purdy, "how was I to know what you'd take it into your head to do? When you threw down the pan and left the diggin's, half an hour ago, I knew blame' well you was up to something. So I trailed you, and waited for you to tip your hand." Rasping contempt was in Purdy's voice as he went on: "What do you think of yourself, anyhow, tryin' to steal a march on a pard this a way?"

Willing put down the rifle and leaned

it against the wall; then he reached for the "makings" and thoughtfully rolled himself a smoke. His lean brown face was inscrutable in the flare of the match. He whiffed a little thread of feathery vapor into the hot, still air.

"Gus," he inquired, "what sort of a march do you reckon I was stealing on you?"

"Huh!" grunted Purdy. "You must think I'm a bonehead. You're goin' over to Randford's to see Mollie. It's my time to use the horse for a ride to Randford's; that was a square-up agreement between us—you, and then me, and you don't get another chance till I've had mine. I'm aimin' to call at Randford's when I get good and ready, and you've got to wait and not go tryin' to steal a march."

Willing laughed; an angry flush leaped into the tan of Purdy's leathery face and a point of flame into the gray of his eyes.

"Mebby you think you've got the inside track," snapped Purdy, "but you wait till the returns are all in."

"Gus," said Willing, "we're pards and—"

"Was pards," cut in the other; "hanged if I know what we've drifted into now. But you can gamble I'm lookin' out for Number One, Steve. That goes as it lays."

"We're pards this minute," insisted Willing, "and I want to remind you that you're acting like a hired man instead of a pard, keeping me covered like that with a six-gun that hasn't got a cartridge in the cylinder. I could mount and ride, and you wouldn't be able to do a thing; but I don't choose to."

In something like trepidation, Purdy turned the gun toward himself and revolved the empty cylinder under his starting eyes. Willing had made a good guess, if it was a guess. There wasn't a cartridge in the weapon.

"I was so worked up with the goin's on these last three days," muttered Purdy, "that I reckon I was absent-minded." He tossed the six-shooter toward the spot where the rifle leaned against the shack wall. "If you're not goin' to Randford's, Steve," he asked, "then what're you fixin' to do?"

"We've been acting like a couple of kids, Gus," replied Willing. "Come over here and I'll show you something; it's funny to me you didn't see it when we came from the placerings for dinner. "I suppose," he added, with just a hint of a smile, "it got past you because you were absent-minded."

Purdy approached his partner, who pointed toward the open door of the shack. A scrap of brown paper was fastened to the door, impaled to the wood by a piece of crucifixion thorn. The paper contained a message, scrawled in pencil. Purdy read the message; then he removed his old hat, ran his fingers through his dark hair, and read the message again.

"I was going on a man hunt, Gus, that's all," remarked Willing; "and I hadn't any intention of calling at Rand-ford's. Wait till I turn Star back into the corral and we'll talk this over. And let's be sensible, old pard; it's about time."

CHAPTER II.

THE BAD MAN'S ULTIMATUM.

WHILE Willing was turning out the horse, Purdy stood in the open door and scowled at the message pinned by the thorn to the rough boards. The message was brief, but very much to the point:

PURDY AND WILLING: This is Monday. If you're not gone from my diggings by Wednesday, I'll pick you off, on the flat or in the placerings. I mean business, and it's your move.

BART GOLLIFER.

"Bendigo" Bart Gollifer was a "bad" man, a two-gun man with a lawless record that would have hung him, or put him behind the bars for life if he could have been apprehended; but he was a fox, and so thoroughly familiar with the mountains and deserts that not one of the many sheriffs who were after him had ever crossed his trail at a point sufficiently close to make the proceeding interesting. Bendigo Bart was a Flying Dutchman sort of person, appearing and disappearing like a phantom, but always leaving material evidence of his predatory powers behind.

This message, pinned with a thorn to

the shack door of Purdy and Willing, was no mere gesture, no act of bravado to be dismissed offhand. Bart Gollifer had threatened others before, and of those who had not obeyed his orders two were dead, one was crippled, and some three or four had hastily left the country.

When Purdy and Willing, prospecting those hills, had loafed into Pima Cañon and had stumbled upon the Pima placerings, there was evidence that some one had been gophering in a desultory, hit-or-miss fashion on the gravel bench. There were no monuments or stakes, however, and no tag of lawful ownership to the property. True, on a flat rock in the cañon wall there had been scratched the notice: "These Placerings Belong to Bendigo Bart. Keep Off!"

Purdy and Willing did not keep off. They knew a good thing when they saw it; and they had the courage of their convictions.

Gollifer was an outlaw. He dared not file a location notice, nor appeal to the law which he was continually outraging for the protection of a mining claim. His next best bet, in case the placerings were discovered by honest men who could file on them, was to do a little conjuring with his black reputation. Purdy and Willing were young and determined and refused to be frightened away.

They had built their shack on Pima Flat; and they had gone around the elbow of the cañon to pile their monuments, put up their location notice, and record, in a proper and legal manner, their ownership of the placer ground. Since Gollifer had not dared to claim the placerings by right of discovery, Purdy and Willing were perfectly justified in claiming it for themselves.

And now, three months after they had started operations, Bendigo Bart had broken a puzzling silence with an order and a threat. Purdy struck the scrap of paper with his clenched fist. Willing, at the moment, returned from the little corral where he had left Star.

"I feel just as you do, Gus," said Willing.

"Was this here at noon, when we came in from the bench to dinner?" asked Purdy.

The other nodded.

"Then why in jumpin' blazes didn't you tell me about it?" Purdy asked.

"Conversation has been blacklisted in this cañon, Gus, for all of three days now," was the answer; "I was anxious to tell you, but you weren't in any mood to hear anything from me. The last thing you said, three days ago, was that if you had to have me around you didn't want me to talk. So I bottled up, Gus. You broke the spell when you rose up out of the chaparral, aimed a useless gun at me, and resumed our interrupted oral exchange of ideas. I welcomed the event. You weren't exactly reasonable, but it seemed as if you were getting that way."

Purdy grunted and sat down on the doorstep. "We'll get at the other end of that later, Steve; just now this Gollifer business ought to claim our attention." He pulled a pipe out of one pocket of his soggy work clothes and a bag of tobacco out of another. "Diggin' nuggets out of a gravel bench is honest men's work," he went on, filling the pipe, "and why Gollifer is so set on holding those placerings when he gets his money so much easier is more than I've been able to figure out. All the same, he seems to be set on shooin' us away."

Purdy trailed a match over the pipe bowl and scowled angrily as he smoked.

"Trouble with Gollifer is," Willing observed, seating himself under a near-by cottonwood, "he wants all the gold in sight, no matter who it belongs to. We knew what would happen when we went to work here, Gus."

"You know what I've been aimin' to do?" asked Purdy, cocking his eyes at Willing in his best imitation of a sphinx propounding a riddle.

"You've been so deep, the past few days, that I couldn't even make a guess."

"Well, this is how deep I've been ever since you and I landed in Pima Cañon. I've thought all along that you and I would lay for Mr. Bendigo Bart, take him into camp when he came here to dig for gold, and then give him a ride into Hackaday and turn him over to the sheriff. There's twenty-five hundred dollars in that, Steve, if we could make it; and it would take us a month to

pan that much out of the placerings. That's what I was aimin' to do."

Willing lifted his eyes to survey the frowning walls of the cañon, fronting each other like the bastions of two feudal castles. He shook his head.

"Gus," he answered, "that was too large an order. From above there, on either side, Bendigo Bart could pick us off at his leisure, here on the flat or up above on the bench. Why he gave us this warning I don't know; but there seems to be a spectacular vein in him, somehow. As I size it up, he'd rather shake his lawlessness in a person's face and see him run. It must be a weakness of Bendigo Bart's."

"Well, you and I don't run; leastways, I don't, although what you was intendin' to do with our horse when I stopped your activities a spell ago is something else I'd like to be told. You weren't going to Randford's, you say; well, if you don't mind, now that we've resumed conversations, just what did you have up your sleeve?"

Willing busied himself with another cigarette. "Gollifer must be hanging out in this vicinity," he explained; "he was here in the cañon this forenoon and fastened that ultimatum to our door; and he'll be staying around here till Wednesday in order to discover whether we obey orders or not."

"I see," mused Purdy, squinting at a lizard that had come out on a rock to sun itself; "you were going to ride to Hackaway and tell the sheriff there about it, so the sheriff could bring a posse come-and-git-us and land on Bendigo—thereby beatin' us out of twenty-five hundred dollars. About as short-sighted a move as a man could make!"

"No; you don't see, Gus," returned Willing; "I was planning to skirmish around and land on Bendigo Bart myself. On partnership account," he hastily added; "you and I to divide the reward if I happened to be successful. And that," he finished, "is the sort of a pard I am, Gus—always thinking square about you even when you were doing a lot of crooked thinking about me."

"That so!" grunted Purdy. "Well, before we get back on a pard basis again,

you and I might as well have a wrassle on that other matter."

CHAPTER III.

TWO MEN AND A WOMAN.

IN the latest dictionaries the word "pardner" is defined as a slang or colloquial variation of "partner," generally implying familiarity or fellowship. Now, while this is all right in a way for "pardner," it misses the word "pard," the contraction of "pardner," by about two miles.

A person can be a "partner" without being a "pardner;" and he or she can be a "pardner" without rising to the affectionate sublimity of the contraction "pard." A "pard" is the *alter ego* of a trusting heart, a double in fidelity—David's Jonathan and Damon's Pythias. Some time the best of the West will force the word into the dictionary, where it will occupy an honored place and be defined as "something more than *fidus Achates* and something less than familiar spirit."

The only thing in this man's world that can possibly come between two pards is what has been called the eternal feminine. As Helen of Troy shook the ancient world, so other Helens have been known to shake a couple of regular pards into opposing positions of the most pronounced suspicion and hostility. For this reason alone, apparently, the eternal feminine has been referred to as the infernal feminine. Pards, of course, are human and have their human weakness.

The name of the Southwestern Helen with whom this record deals was Mollie Randford, and she was the niece of Sim Randford who had recently moved into the adobe on the desert oasis known as Tinaja Wells. Mollie kept house for her uncle; and since Tinaja Wells furnished the only water between Pima Cañon and Hackaday, and was on the direct road between the two points, it very naturally happened that Purdy and Willing formed the girl's acquaintance.

The two pards rode Star into town for provisions turn about. Willing was first to strike up an acquaintance, and Purdy was next. The first sign of trouble in the cañon arrived when Willing offered

to make all the trips to town for supplies, and when Purdy countered with a similar offer of his own. The ugly head of suspicion showed itself and was presently resolved into hard-and-fast evidence: Both pards were paying court to Mollie Randford.

The rift grew with the revelation, in spite of the despairing struggles of that instinct of fellowship and sacrifice which had made the pardners pards. Each tried to fight down his rising resentment; and then, finding that impossible, each tried to be fair with the other, make it any man's race, and abide cheerfully by the result. As they used Star turn about in going to town after supplies, so they took turns riding over to Tinaja Wells to call on Mollie. After one of them visited the Wells, he was in honor bound not to go there again until the other had his chance.

This method worked tolerably well until Purdy, inspired by some demon of jealous perversity, canceled his own trip to the Wells and so kept Willing away from the Randfords. It was a dog-in-the-manger policy; Purdy wouldn't go himself, and so he kept Willing from going. There was a reason for this; and the reason led up to the break between the pards and the three silent days that followed.

On his last trip from the Wells, Willing had triumphantly exhibited a cabinet photograph of Mollie, inscribed in a somewhat cramped hand: "Steve, with love from Mollie." An earthquake seemed to hit Purdy right between the eyes when he saw that picture; he threw the photo across the shack, berated Willing in a way he had never done before, and wound up his torrent of hot words by saying: "It's hard enough to have you around without listenin' to your fool gabble. Don't you speak to me no more, that's all; don't you speak to me ag'in, Willing, till I bust the ice—then you can come through or not, just as you blame' please."

It was almost epic, that row. For three days there followed an eloquent silence. It had been the custom every evening for first one pard and then the other to saddle Star and ride over to Tinaja Wells. But Purdy cut out the visits; and that

kept Willing away from the Wells unless, as Purdy figured in his resentful heart, he would break his solemn word and go there anyhow.

So, when Willing got ready to leave the diggings early in the afternoon, apparently without rhyme or reason, Purdy guessed that Willing was trying to steal a march on him and ride to the Randfords'. Purdy then spied upon his partner, with the result that has been duly chronicled. The two were again on speaking terms; and they were faced with a common danger that should draw them together and make for amity; but before they returned to their old friendly associations Purdy felt the necessity of some understanding regarding Mollie.

Willing was just starting in on his second cigarette; and he seemed in a genial and confident mood.

"Before I show you something that will prove decidedly interesting to you, pard," said Willing, "I'm going to ask you to make a bargain with me."

Suspicion leaped into Purdy's narrowing gray eyes. "What sort of a bargain, Steve?" he demanded.

"For the last three days, Gus, we've certainly done a lot of good work in the placerings. The way I figure it, we've panned more dirt these last three days than in any week since we've been here. We've bobcatted more nuggets, too, in half a week than in any other week since we located the claim. Now, why let Mollie interfere with our business? Suppose we call off all visits to Tinaja Wells and just settle down to develop our holdings? We're going to have our hands full, with Bendigo Bart threatening us, anyhow. And you know, Gus, that sentiment and business don't mix. Let's forget sentiment, remember we're pards, and cut out the boy play. Is it a go?"

This seemed more than generous to Purdy, with all the advantages of sentiment apparently on Willing's side.

"That's spoken like a real pard, Steve!" declared Purdy warmly, getting up from the doorstep and putting out his hand. "I'm agreeable; shake."

They shook hands; and then Willing dipped into his inside pocket and drew forth a cabinet photo. Purdy began to freeze.

"Now, Gus, don't lose your head," implored Willing; "Look at that; read the inscription, and you'll be surprised."

Purdy accepted the picture and looked at it with gloomy eyes; but the gloom faded as he read: "Gus, with love from Mollie."

"Did you fix this over?" he demanded suspiciously.

"No, Gus," was the answer; "I've got one just like it, with my name on it instead of yours. Mollie isn't playing any favorites. When she gave me my picture, she gave me one for you at the same time. I'd have given it to you three days ago, if you hadn't gone off the handle; then I made up my mind that I'd see just how far your foolishness would carry you. Now what do you think of yourself, Old Touch-and-go?"

Purdy's leathery face broke into a wide grin. "Pards we are and pards we'll be, Steve, come hell or high water!" he cried. "Shake again, old scout!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGE LUCK BRINGER.

THERE'S a new freshness in the air after a storm that always makes one glad the elements stirred things up. That was the sort of gladness that settled upon Willing and Purdy. For an hour, each with a cabinet photo in front of him, they sat out in front of their shack recalling times past and the debts each owed the other.

Two years before, Willing had been a tenderfoot hunting for health and wealth in the mesas and mountains. Unfamiliar with the country and its ways, he had been caught in a cloud-burst in Lost Man Gulch. The gulch would have had another lost man to its credit if Purdy hadn't come to the rescue. That was their first meeting, and the service rendered by Purdy made them friends right from the start. They decided to do their prospecting in partnership.

Six months later, when Purdy fell from a cliff and broke his leg, Willing set the fractured bone and then struggled over thirty miles of uninhabited desert, undergoing incredible hardships without a murmur in order to get his injured friend into a doctor's hands. Purdy always

said that he owed Willing his life for that display of gameness and devotion; and when Purdy came out of the hospital, and they resumed their prospecting together, they had graduated from their partnership into the high estate of pards. "One for both and both for one," was their motto.

In a most beautiful companionship they struggled and toiled and thirsted and wandered. The rainbow of hope lured them constantly on, but no strike rewarded their efforts until they had found that gravel bench in Pima Cañon and had taken legally what a hunted outlaw was attempting to hold illegally. Inspired by the before-mentioned infernal feminine, the storm of conflicting emotions had darkened the skies of their pardship; but now the clouds had cleared away, and a new bond seemed to have been forged, doubly riveting the pards one to the other.

Purdy had made a mistake. His temper had got the best of him, and he felt that he had done his pard a grievous injury.

"There ain't much I can do, Steve, to square things for that misplay I made," said Purdy, "but I'd like right well if you would let me give you the bobcat."

"No, Gus," answered Steve firmly; "I draw the line on the bobcat. We'll use it as a cache, just as we've started to do, but that's all the further I care to go in the matter of your bobcat."

"It's a lucky piece, Steve," insisted Purdy; "the professor that stuffed it told me so when he gave it to me for giving him the buck's head; and you know I had the bobcat along when we found these Pima placerings."

There was a vein of superstition in Purdy, and the better-informed Willing could not argue him out of it. In their travels about the deserts the stuffed bobcat was always toted, with great inconvenience, on top of the burro's pack. Purdy always insisted, and Willing was too good a pard not to humor another pard's whim. Nevertheless, that stuffed bobcat had become a nightmare to Willing.

It had always been a grotesque feature of their pilgrimages—two burros, packing supplies for two prospectors, and a

bobcat standing upright on a strip of board lashed to one of the packs, jogging through the arid wilderness in sublime disregard of anything like common sense or usefulness. The burros had been sold, after the discovery in Pima Cañon, and Star had been purchased to make easier and faster the trips to town; but the bobcat remained and occupied a specially built shelf in the shack.

The bobcat's head had been broken off by a fall from the shelf, and Willing's hope that this would finish the bobcat was blighted. Purdy mended the break, hinging the head so that it could be lifted; and then he had excavated stuffing inside the bobcat, and made a roomy opening in which could be stored the buckskin bag containing the nuggets panned from the placerings. This ingenuity of Purdy's in providing a safe hiding place for their joint wealth gave the bobcat, in Willing's estimation, the first excuse for having the thing around.

Purdy got up and went into the house, returning presently with the moth-eaten specimen of the taxidermist's art. It was not a beautiful specimen, for in its wanderings about the desert, Geronimo, as Purdy called the bobcat, had lost its tail and one of its ears; but it was wired securely to a section of board, and there it continued to remain in spite of all its vicissitudes.

"You—you don't really think you'd like this luck-bringer, Steve?" inquired Purdy, putting Geronimo down on the doorstep and gazing at it fondly.

"No, Gus," replied Willing; "I wouldn't feel right if I deprived you of it."

"Mollie was real interested when I told her about Geronimo," Purdy went on, as though that bit of information might help to alter Willing's decision.

"Oh, you told her about the bobcat, did you?" Willing inquired, with a flicker of interest.

"Not much I haven't told Mollie," returned Purdy.

"Did you tell her about our using it for a cache for our gold?"

"Sure; and do you know, Steve, she told me I was the most ingenious person she had ever known."

"H'm!" coughed Willing.

Purdy pulled back the head of Geronimo and drew into sight, along with a trace of sawdust and a bit of excelsior, a buckskin bag three quarters full and corrugated with lumps.

"In about another week, Steve," Purdy went on, weighing the buckskin bag in his hands, "I don't know but you'd better go to town and turn this gold into cash. We've got the bag pretty near full."

"All right, Gus," said Willing; "when it won't hold any more, you ride to town with it. But don't forget Wednesday. We've got something to look out for this coming week. Why, Bendigo Bart may be watching us this very minute, pard."

Hastily Purdy crammed the bag back into its cache, dropped the head in place, and retreated into the shack with the stuffed specimen.

"That's right," he observed, returning and picking up the six-gun from its place beside the rifle; "you and me, pard, have got to be ready for what they call eventualities. Between us, somehow, we've got to make Gollifer hard to find. I won't allow you to go hunting him alone; I'm for staying right here, the two of us, and fightin' him off."

Purdy began stuffing cartridges into the cylinder of the revolver. "We got to be ready," he added. "Is the rifle's magazine full up?"

Willing nodded. "It would be great business, Gus," he said, "if we could lay Gollifer by the heels; and if it's your idea that we can turn that trick better by staying right here and defying him to do his worst, rather than by hunting for him through the hills, then I'm with you. Whatever my pard says goes with me."

"Now you're talkin' like the old Steve!" declared Purdy joyously.

CHAPTER V.

OVERCOME BY SUDDEN MYSTERY.

IN his message Gollifer had named Wednesday as the fateful day on which his reprisals were to begin. Purdy and Willing, however, were running no chances, and they took immediate measures to place themselves on a war footing. Monday night, for the first time since they

had taken up quarters on Pima Flat, they barred their shack door; and Willing took the six-gun to bed with him and Purdy slept with the rifle by his side.

Nothing untoward happened. Peace reigned in the cañon during the dark hours, and the primeval silence was broken only by the gurgle of Pima Creek, a few restless movements of Star in his corral, and the usual chorus of distant coyote yelps.

The pards were not lulled into any fancied sense of security. As a depredator, Bendigo Bart was full of surprises and mysterious stratagems. Well aware of this, the cautiousness of the pards increased.

Tuesday morning they prepared breakfast for themselves and gave Star his rations with their guns handy and every sense on the alert; and when they went to their placerings they took the horse with them, and they went armed.

Above the gravel bench, just around the "elbow" of the cañon, there was an overhang of the clifflike wall. Boulders were piled under the lip of the overhang and an excellent breastwork devised, with loopholes commanding the cañon up and down and across. If Gollifer came with a gang, Purdy and Willing could retreat into their fort and successfully withstand the attack of a small army.

The really dangerous part of their defiance, and the one impossible to guard against, was a drop-fire from the top of the cañon walls; but the pards, figuring that a drop-fire is more or less unreliable, took that chance. At the first crack of a gun overhead, they would rush to the overhang; and there they would be safe from bullets from above and all set to withstand an attack from the cañon itself.

These preparations consumed an hour and, after they were finished, the pards dug their morning's quota of "pay dirt," wheeled it down to the edge of the creek, and bent over their gold pans.

Purdy was a master hand with a gold pan, and Willing had profited greatly by his expert instruction. Washing out the dirt and gravel with rapidity, and without losing any of the gold, demanded a twist of the wrist that was a knack all in itself. Willing had proved an apt pupil

and had come to a point where he was almost as proficient as Purdy.

In spite of the ingenuity displayed by Purdy in turning Geronimo into a cache, the fact remained that Willing was a better hand at figuring and had more imagination than his pard. Possibly, although not by any means certainly, this was because Willing had received a college education, while Purdy was mostly self-instructed and had little book learning.

Willing was looking forward to the time when, their joint capital warranting the outlay, the waters of the Pima could be diverted above the bench and sluiced through the placerings in such a manner that pay dirt could be shoveled into the sluice box and the current would do the panning, catching the gold on a series of "riffles." But all this was a look ahead, to the time when the rich black sand close to bed rock could be looted of its wealth. Then, indeed, the Pima placerings would pay enormous profits.

For ages the creek had brought down its fine gold from the head waters. At the elbow of the cañon most of this gold had lodged. The bench had gradually been built up as the creek worked its way downward through the eternal rocks and, through the slow centuries, formed the gulch.

The claim was a rich one, and with every day's work it was growing richer and richer. To hang on there and see the enterprise through meant independence, wealth, and success in the world. And herein lay the secret of that resolute defiance of the outlaw, Bendigo Bart Gollifer; and herein, too, lay the secret of Gollifer's determination to have what he could not legally hold. Gold is one of the bones of civilization; and there has been more fighting between men and nations over that particular bone than over all the rest of the prized bones put together.

Peace continued to reign in the cañon. At eleven o'clock Willing had an idea. Somehow, nearly all the really masterful ideas had a way of originating with Willing. Purdy himself cheerfully acknowledged this.

"Gus," said Willing, climbing out of the creek and dropping his gold pan, "we usually knock off work here at noon and

return to the flat for dinner. Gollifer probably knows that; in fact, he may be counting on it. He is aiming, of course, to fool us; and it strikes me if we could begin fooling him by running counter to our usual form, it would be the part of wisdom."

Purdy, knee-deep in the creek, straightened up with his gold pan in his hands. "Meanin' which, Steve?" he inquired.

"I'll ride back to the flat now and get our dinner ready. In half an hour you come on. By twelve, if Gollifer is waiting above the flat to pick us off, we'll be back here at the diggings."

Purdy considered that. He pushed up the brim of his old hat and ran a muddy hand through his hair. Then realization of the stratagem dawned on him, and he nodded.

"Mebby you're right, Steve," he said, "but I don't want to put all the housework off onto you. I'm willin' to get the dinner."

"No; you keep right on panning, Gus," Willing insisted, "and I'll have our snack ready in half an hour. And when we come back this afternoon, I think we'd better bring the bag of dust. Geronimo is a safe guardian, I suppose, but I'd feel easier in my mind if we carried the bag of dust around with us."

Purdy grinned delightedly. "We'll bring Geronimo, bag and all!" he declared. "Wonder I didn't think of that this morning. The old reliable luck-bringer will help us to put it over on Gollifer. Say, Steve, you certainly don't let much get away from you."

Having the stuffed bobcat at the placerings was not much to Willing's notion; nevertheless he conceded the point, just as a pard should, and went down to the creek side where Star had been left grazing in the mesquite. He pulled up the picket pin, tightened the saddle cinches, mounted, and started for the flat.

Five minutes later, from around the bend of the cañon, Purdy heard the crack of a firearm. He dropped his gold pan and staggered back in consternation. The cañon picked up the echoes of the shot and flung them back and forth until it was impossible for Purdy to tell whether a revolver or a rifle had been

fired. Muttering to himself, he grabbed the rifle and started at a run for the flat.

A heavy silence reigned about the shack. Willing was gone, Star was gone, and Geronimo was standing on his head by the doorstep. An inspection of Geronimo disclosed the fact that the gold was gone, too.

"Steve!" yelled Purdy frantically, trumpeting through his hands. "Hey, Steve!"

The only answer was the echo of that wild cry. Purdy sank down on the doorstep, overcome by this sudden mystery.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENED.

IF Steve Willing was more imaginative than his pard, his thoughts also ran deeper. He used language very often for the purpose of concealing his ideas—all with the best intent, of course; and occasionally he would do one thing for the purpose of accomplishing another.

The affair of the cabinet photographs is a case in point. Having two photographs, one inscribed to himself and the other to his pard, he had first showed his own; this by way of noting the effect on Purdy. The effect having proved catastrophic, Willing had continued to hold back Purdy's photograph for three days just to see how far pardship could travel with a chip on its shoulder. The upshot of the affair of the photographs had been highly illuminating.

In explaining his reason for leaving the placer and returning to the flat at eleven o'clock, Willing had merely couched an excuse in terms his pard would credit and understand. Willing's real reason was not to fool Bendigo Bart by taking dinner at an unusual hour; far from it.

Willing, as he worked that morning, had been worrying about the gold. He had not the faith in Geronimo that Purdy had, especially since Purdy had blandly explained how his ingenuity in making a cacne of the stuffed bobcat had been admired by Mollie Randford.

Geronimo, to Purdy, was a totem, a lucky piece, a luck bringer. Had Willing ventured the statement that Geronimo was no longer a safe guardian for the

partnership gold, the mended peace would have been threatened again. So Willing worried about the gold in silence, until at last he made up his mind to go back to the flat and remain with it; and getting dinner at eleven instead of at twelve was merely camouflage to make the move agreeable to Purdy.

Besides, Willing had a foreboding that something was wrong; just what he did not know, but he was determined to find out. As he rode around the bend in the cañon and opened out the flat ahead of him, his foreboding bore startling fruit.

There was a horse under saddle at the door of the shack, an unfamiliar bay that Willing was looking at for the first time; and there was a man sitting on the doorstep, a man in a slouched sombrero with a bandanna handkerchief pulled up from his throat to cover his face to the eyes. The man was as unfamiliar as the horse.

The stranger's actions, however, were eloquent of his intentions. He had the bobcat between his knees and was removing the buckskin bag. Willing put Star to the gallop and drew the six-gun.

The thump of hoofs attracted the thief's attention. He dropped the bobcat and leaped into his saddle, the bag of gold in his hands. Another moment and he was in full flight, his horse racing down the slope of the flat and making speed along the bed of the cañon, by the creek.

Willing lifted the revolver and fired once. Once was enough, for he realized that he was throwing away ammunition that would be valuable at closer quarters. The thief was belted with guns, and a rifle lay across the saddle in front of him; but he did not pause to return his pursuer's fire, evidently thinking that his time could be used to better advantage in making a get-away.

The chase was on; and while Willing regretted the loss of the gold that was threatened, he welcomed the opportunity the theft was affording him.

For, of course, this thief could be none other than Gollifer. He was appearing in his usual spectral manner and was attempting to disappear in the same way. But Willing had him under his eyes, and here was a chance to lay the shifty outlaw by the heels—a better chance than

Willing had when Purdy, through a misunderstanding, had halted him the day before.

Now the trail was hot, and there could be a sure-enough man hunt.

Pursued and pursuer tore down the cañon, emerged from the jumble of rocks at its mouth, followed the creek as it dribbled away and finally sank into the sands of the desert, and then took a new slant back toward the hills again.

Star was fresh and on his mettle. The bay also was fresh and equally spirited. Here was proof that Gollifer had been haunting the vicinity of the cañon and had not been compelled to ride far in reaching the shack on the flat.

So far as speed was concerned, there was hardly a toss-up between Star and the bay. Willing was not gaining on his quarry, and neither was he losing; he was simply holding his own, and in a long chase the stamina of the horses would alone turn the trick, one way or the other.

Back into the hills again plunged the bay, taking to a draw with an upward slope. This was well to the west of the cañon, where the country was rocky, precipitous, and gashed and seamed in a most confusing manner.

"I've got to get that gold back," Willing was saying to himself, through his set teeth; "even if I have to shoot it out with that thief, I can't see the development of the placer fade away like this! And then, there's the twenty-five hundred!"

He settled himself grimly to a long run and a final set-to at close quarters. In such a set-to with guns the advantage would all be on the side of the thief. He had a rifle; and at any time he could have turned in his saddle, steadied his weapon, fired at his convenience, and picked Willing off the Star horse well beyond revolver range.

Willing wondered why the man did not attempt that sort of a maneuver. The only resistance that he cared to show, it seemed, was demonstrated by flight.

It was not known certainly, but it was fully believed, that Gollifer had a desperate gang at his heels. During the pursuit it occurred to Willing that Gollifer

might be leading him into the haunts of the gang, where he would stand no show at all against overwhelming numbers.

Such a stratagem did not deter Willing, however. His spirit was up. The gold that was fading away meant development work at the placer, and the man who was being pursued meant twenty-five hundred dollars of the State's and the county's money. That reward, with the recovered gold, would put the finishing touch of river diversion and sluice box to the mining operations in the cañon. Willing would "get" Bendigo Bart or die in the effort.

Gollifer conned his flight through a narrowly closing arroyo that opened off the draw. The sides of the arroyo were sheer, but hardly more than head-high to a man on a horse. The chase was becoming exciting and promising when the unexpected happened.

A noose leaped out from the top of the arroyo wall. Thrown unerringly, it dropped over the head of the unsuspecting pursuer, gripped him about the waist, imprisoned his arms at his sides, and then, as the rope grew taut, dragged him roughly out of the saddle and flung him to the hard ground with a jolt that spangled the midday heavens with stars and left, as an aftermath, a daze that was the equivalent of unconsciousness. Star sped on; and Willing lay limply where he had fallen.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE.

AT Pima Flat Purdy was making a frantic search. He poked into every brushy corner of the cottonwood grove; he looked behind rocks; he ran down the cañon, yelling vainly for "Steve! Hey, Steve!" and he returned wearily to the flat and ransacked the shack. There was no sign of Steve; no sign of Star; not even a telltale crimson stain anywhere.

A slow horror had been growing on Purdy. Bendigo Bart had made one of his characteristic plays ahead of time. He had "picked off" Steve; and by some of the hocus-pocus of which he was a master, he had blotted all evidence of Steve and Star out of the cañon. Super-

stition, that bird of ill omen, roosted in Purdy's thoughts and began to croak. Cold shivers rippled up and down his spine. The grief in his heart was clamoring for expression, but the folly in his head was clamoring even louder. Mystery! Hocus-pocus! And Bendigo Bart was back of it!

Purdy grabbed up the bobcat and the rifle and retreated into the shack. "Geronimo," he whispered huskily, "if you ever turned a good trick for me get on the job—do it now."

He locked the door; and for an hour he sat on an empty cracker box, Geronimo at his side, the rifle across his knees, waiting for some bolt from the blue to fall upon him, annihilate him, and completely wipe him out.

Nothing happened. Reviving a little, he put Geronimo back on the shelf and began to walk the floor. What was he to do now?

Gradually he began to make some headway against the demoralization that had gripped him. What he ought to do was to go looking for Bendigo Bart, find him and force him to reveal the fate of Steve. He and Steve had been pards, and he was obligated to do just that.

The dark of sundown was in the cañon before Purdy had reasoned himself into an enterprising mood. It was necessary for him to have a horse, and the nearest place at which a horse could be had was Randford's. That was it! He'd hike for Tinaja Wells and borrow a saddle horse; then he'd ride until he found out what had happened to his pard.

It was the old desert man planning now, throttling his superstitious fears and trying to be practical. With a heavy heart, he lighted the coal-oil stove, made himself some coffee and fried some bacon. Following the meal, he filled the water canteen from the pail, swung it over his shoulder, laid hold of the rifle, and let himself out into the spooky shadows of the cañon. He turned back with the idea of toting Geronimo along as a charm, but was sensible enough to give it up. There was a twenty-mile hike ahead of him, he remembered, and rifle and canteen were about all he ought to encumber himself with.

Like a shadow he left the shack and

stole across the flat. The yelp of a coyote caused him to break into a frenzied run, and he did not slacken the pace until he had emerged from the cañon into the flat desert. There the gloom was not so thick, and the starshine lighted his course.

Twenty miles! Well, he was used to footwork and that would be easy. He would loaf along, rest when he grew tired, and plan to reach the Wells by sun-up. Anything was better than trying to spend a night in that bewitched cañon.

He jogged along, theorizing about that shot he had heard. Bendigo Bart had probably fired it. There had been no second shot; and that meant—that meant—Purdy swallowed hard. He hated to think what it meant; but, if he lived, he was going to find out exactly what had happened to Steve.

About the time the stars indicated midnight, Purdy felt tired, and he sat down to rest under a shadowy ironwood tree. He had not intended to sleep, but the trying experiences of the day overpowered him, and he slumped down in the sand and lost himself. When he opened his eyes he was cold, for there was a chill to the night air. It was getting along toward dawn. Grumbling to himself at the delay, he climbed to his feet and set off briskly. And the sun was just looking over the rim of the desert when he approached the homelike adobe at the oasis. Out of the chimney of the adobe he could see a plume of white smoke.

"Mollie's about gettin' breakfast, I reckon," mused Purdy. "She'll certainly be surprised when I tell her about Steve."

An ugly thought came sneaking into Purdy's mind. Steve was gone now; with him out of the way—Purdy caught himself up.

"Steve was a regular pard," he muttered fiercely, "and I'm a low-down coyote to start thinkin' about what his bein' gone might mean in the case of Mollie. I'll borrow the horse, and mebbly I'll eat breakfast if I'm invited, but right after that I'll go huntin' Gollifer."

Purdy passed the well, came down along the gurgling overflow that watered the garden patch, and so arrived at the

open kitchen door. A young woman of twenty-four or twenty-five was busy over the stove. Her sleeves were rolled to the elbows, and one shapely right hand was stirring potatoes in a frying pan.

"Buenos, Mollie!" called Purdy.

Mollie whirled, amazement in her hazel eyes. "Gus!" she cried. "Gus, if it ain't! Well, my land! Seems like an age since I seen you, Gus. Come in; it won't cost any more than to stand outside. I'm all alone here, Uncle Sim having gone over to Red Hill on business yesterday. Ain't you stirrin' pretty early, Gus? Come from the cañon?"

Purdy entered the kitchen, stood his rifle in a corner, laid the canteen beside it, and slowly faced the girl. "Somethin' turrrible has happened, Mollie," he told her, gloomily shaking his head.

"It can't be so very terrible, Gus," was the answer; "you seem to be all right."

There was an artless depth to this which escaped Purdy.

"My pard Steve——" Purdy choked and sank into a chair.

"Steve?" urged Mollie. "What about Steve?"

"I—I reckon he's done for," replied Purdy. "Looks like Bendigo Bart had finished him, and I'm on the hunt for Bart to find out."

Mollie took it very calmly. "You pull up to the table, Gus," she said; "I'll put on another plate. While we eat you can tell me all about it."

They ate; and between mouthfuls Purdy gave the harrowing details. Still Mollie was not impressed, that is, not in the way Purdy was feeling.

"Steve's gone, you say," remarked Mollie, "and your gold is gone, and your horse is gone. Looks like you'd had it put over on you, Gus."

Purdy dropped his knife and fork and stared. "Meanin' which?" he demanded.

Mollie helped herself to a spoonful of hot tamale. "Say, I'm surprised at you, Gus," she remarked; "a man your age ought to be old enough to figger two and two when it's plain as that."

There it was—the infernal feminine cropping out. Augustus Purdy choked as he swallowed his coffee.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEEDS OF SUSPICION.

DURING a minute of silence, Mollie of Tinaja Wells filled Purdy's coffee cup for the third time.

"I reckoned you knew Steve better'n that, Mollie," said Purdy in mild protest, "him comin' here every other evenin' for so long, and you givin' him photographs and the like of that."

Mollie shrugged her shapely shoulders, shooed a Plymouth Rock out of the kitchen, and again resumed her chair and her breakfast.

"Do you know, Gus," she said with fervor, "sometimes I just wisht I was a man?"

"Well, now," returned Purdy, "I wouldn't go so far as to wish that myself."

"It's like this," continued Mollie brightly; "most men never know a thing till they find it out. I've got a way of knowing a thing before it happens, and if I was a man I could make it count; but if you're a woman, Gus, you've got to let things drift. I'll fry some more bacon if you say so."

Purdy made a deprecating motion with his hand. "Not for me, Mollie; I've had aplenty. I'm so broken up over Steve that I hardly know whether I'm eating bacon or spuds. We've been together a long time, him and me."

"Did he give you that photo?" Mollie inquired.

The photo, and the misunderstanding it had caused, recurred to Purdy, and the thought of his jealousy and his injustice touched him like a hot iron.

"He did; of course he did! He carries his with him all the time, Mollie, and I've got mine right here." He touched the breast pocket of his coat. "I think a heap of it, and I'm obliged to you for sendin' it to me."

"Uncle Sim says it hardly does me justice," went on Mollie archly. "What do you think, Gus?"

"Good as it is, it ain't in no photograph to do you justice."

Mollie wagged a finger at him. "Flatterer!" she said.

Purdy pushed back from the table. "I was feelin' pretty down in the mouth

when I walked in your door, Mollie, but just talkin' with you has heartened me a lot. But I'm beggin' of you not to get Steve wrong. I intend to do for him just what he'd do for me if I had been picked off by Bendigo Bart. That's what it means to be pards, Mollie."

"Well, it's wonderful the way you two hang together," returned Mollie, "but I'd admire to see an ingenious man like you, Gus, use a little common sense. How is the placer coming along?"

"There's no placer ground in the Superstitions to compare with that bench in Pima Cañon!" replied Purdy. "With the sluice in, there's a fortune to be taken out of it."

Mollie looked into vacancy. "Now that Steve's gone, it'll all be yours, won't it, Gus?"

Purdy slumped in his chair. He had not thought of that till Mollie had reminded him of it. "I reckon so," he murmured heavily; "but I'm not thinkin' of that. I'd give my share of the placerings this minute to have good old Steve back like he was. A fine figger of a man, Mollie! One of the finest you could meet anywhere."

Mollie looked skeptical, and that seemed passing strange to Purdy.

"What I'd like is to borrow a horse of Randford," he went on, "so'st I can go looking for Bendigo Bart."

"My riding horse is the only one that's left," said Mollie; "Uncle Sim has got the other one. But you're welcome to Pinto, Gus, only I hate to think of your trailin' that man. He's quick with a gun——"

"No quicker'n I am," cut in Purdy.

"I certainly hope you're right; it—it means so much, you know."

Mollie flushed as she spoke. Purdy tried to understand what she meant, but worry had befogged his understanding which was never very acute.

"I reckon I'll be on my way, Mollie," he remarked, getting up, "if you'll show me where I can find the ridin' gear. Work ahead—plenty of it."

"Where do you allow to do most of your hunting, Gus?" the girl asked.

"Around in the hills. You see, Bendigo Bart has ordered Steve and me away, and allowed us till to-day to quit

the cañon. He'll be around there some'ers, of course."

"He will not!" declared Mollie. "If he ordered you out of the cañon—well, you have obeyed orders, haven't you? Steve has left, and you have left. Why should Bendigo Bart stick around after he's got what he wanted? It wouldn't be healthy for him, would it? I am asking you to think that over, Gus."

Purdy thought it over, and the logic of it captured him. "If you was in my place, Mollie," he inquired, "where would you go?"

"I'd go over to Red Hill and look for Uncle Sim," was the prompt response. "Tell him what has happened, and take his advice. He's real clever, Gus, and he's a true friend of yours."

Half an hour later, Purdy was riding a painted horse in the direction of Red Hill, and he was doing a lot of thinking as he rode.

Mollie Randford had a bright mind. That was one thing about her that he had admired ever since he had formed her acquaintance. It was queer, everything considered, how she was getting Steve wrong.

Of course it was not possible that Steve was up to anything. It wasn't in him to cut loose from a pard in the way Mollie had intimated. Still, Steve could have done it. Just supposing that was his intention, he could have used the enmity of Bendigo Bart as a cover for his treachery. Steve could have fired that revolver, just to make it appear as though something had gone wrong with him; and then he could have disappeared with the gold and with the only horse in the cañon, and—and——

"No!" barked Purdy into the trail dust kicked up by the pinto. "Steve and I are pards, and pards never play it so low-down on each other. I wish Mollie hadn't said that."

He tried to dismiss that phase of the subject from his mind, but it kept haunting him.

"The placer is rich, and Steve would be a fool to cut loose from it," Purdy communed with himself, "even with our row with Bendigo Bart warming up. He wouldn't do such a thing, and I'll tell the hull world."

Nevertheless, Purdy as he rode toward Red Hill, had changed his plans somewhat. He was looking for three men, Gollifer, Randford, and Steve; but, more particularly, he was looking for Steve.

"More'n likely Randford can help me," he muttered, pulling his toil-worn hand across his eyes; "Randford wouldn't think that of Steve, any more'n I would. All this comes," he added bitterly, "of tryin' to turn a hard trick without havin' Geronimo along."

CHAPTER IX.

MORE HOCUS-POCUS.

NOW that the Red Hill placerings had been worked out, Red Hill's excuse for occupying a spot on the map was gone; but surface indications remained in the form of a score of shacks and adobes, a few of them occupied by gleaners panning for a second time the sand and gravel and trying to be satisfied with the modest pickings. And there were two or three cattle ranches that continued to look to Red Hill as a base of supplies. One of the twenty shelters was still the McCallum House, struggling in those declining days to make itself pay as a hotel.

Purdy rode through the sun-blistered, deserted street, secured Pinto at the hotel hitching pole, and went inside. McCallum the proprietor, was asleep in a chair tilted back against the office wall. No one else was around, and bluebottles hummed in a melancholy way against the dusty windowpanes.

"Hey, Mac!" called Purdy.

The proprietor was in his shirt sleeves, both hands across his chest, a palm-leaf fan in one, a red bandanna in the other, and dreams of bygone prosperity perhaps were chasing themselves through his dozing wits. His head jerked backward at the call, and the chair thumped down on its tilted legs.

"Hey?" he returned confusedly. "Well, if it ain't Gus Purdy! How's everything over to the cañon, Gus?"

"Plumb worse than it ought to be, Mac. Where's Sim Randford?"

"Not here; and he hasn't been in Red Hill for a month. What should any one want to be in Red Hill for?" inquired

McCallum plaintively, mopping his face. "Only," he qualified, "them that's stuck here and can't get out—like me. You after supplies, Gus? I thought you always went to Hackaday."

"I'm not buying supplies this morning, Mac. I'm lookin' for Sim Randford, and I had it pretty straight he'd come to Red Hill."

"Well, he didn't, and I reckon I'd know if he had."

"Any—anybody else been around here lately? Haven't seen Steve here, have you?"

"Steve? No." McCallum looked curious. "You ought to know more about Steve than anybody else, him being your pard. What's to pay, Gus?"

Thereupon Purdy repeated his mystery story, and told how Bendigo Bart had threatened him and Steve and how Steve had mysteriously disappeared. He was very careful not to allow the slightest implication of any lack of faith in Steve to touch his recital. He was just trailing a mystery, that was all, and looking for a missing pard, and Sim Randford if he could find him; and Gollifer, by gorry, he sure would like to come company front with Gollifer!

McCallum was intensely interested, but he was not a source of much consolation. The dark side was McCallum's every time, for failing prosperity had made him a pessimist. He shook his head forebodingly.

"Steve's done for, no two ways about that, Gus," the hotel man croaked; "and you'd have been done for, too, if you hadn't pulled your freight out of the cañon. Say, I wouldn't be in your shoes for the hull State of Arizona. This Bendigo Bart is a spook killer, and there's no meeting him face to face, or even locating him. Jim Friday is pottering around the Hill trying to look him up; but, shucks, it's a waste of time."

Purdy had seated himself on the edge of a chair; he was tapping the chair arms with his fingers and the board floor with the toe of one of his brogans. He was nervous and excited, and if he changed the position of the rifle in his lap once, he did it a dozen times.

"I'm goin' to land on something, Mac," he said resolutely; "you can bank

on that. If there's nothin' for me in Red Hill, I allow I'll be movin' on."

"Don't be foolish, Gus," returned McCallum; "put out your horse and stick around until after the heat of the day."

"Can't! I'm so worked up about Steve and Gollifer I just got to keep on the go. Mebby I'll be back; Randford ought to be around some'rs, and I've got to have a talk with him."

He moved to the open door, then stopped and fell back a step. "Where's my horse?" he yelled.

Pinto was not at the hitching pole where Purdy had left him. Here was another disappearance; not as unaccountable as that of Steve's, but still exceedingly bewildering.

"Maybe you didn't tie him fast, Gus," McCallum suggested, "and he got away and went back to the cañon."

"Well, look," protested Purdy; "that wasn't our partnership horse. I told you he'd gone with Steve. This mount was one I borrowed at Randford's—Mollie Randford's painted cayuse. That horse has been stolen, Mac, from right in front of your place, in broad day, while I've been in here!"

"Use a little sense, Gus," implored McCallum; "there ain't a horse thief in Red Hill, and you ought to know better than to say such things. Maybe my Chinaman put him in the corral. Let's look."

Pinto was not in the corral, however, nor anywhere else in the town that Purdy and McCallum could find. Several citizens along the one street of the place were prodded into wakefulness and questioned. Not one of them had seen the pinto, or was aware that the pinto had been removed.

Purdy, dusty and hot and discouraged, returned at last to the hotel office. "Beats all the tough luck I'm havin'," he grumbled.

"I'll let you have another horse, Gus," suggested the hotel proprietor, "if you're bound to go on with your fool search."

Purdy shook his head. "That won't do. I'd cut a nice figger, goin' back to Randford's and tellin' Mollie I'd lost her horse! I got to find that Pinto; that's all about it."

"You might as well stay for dinner,

anyway," went on McCallum; "like enough you'll get some news about the horse if you'll just sit tight and wait."

Purdy sat tight and waited for three long, miserable days, loafing around the hotel, rambling through the town, making trips to the old placerings. No news about Pinto came his way, and none seemed at all likely to come his way.

On the third day, when Purdy had made up his mind that something just had to be done if he wasn't to go crazy, Jim Friday rode into Red Hill, turned his tired horse into the hotel corral, and walked into the hotel office, pounding trail dust from his clothes. His face lighted up at sight of Purdy.

"I'm looking for you, Gus," he remarked.

"You found Steve, Jim?" demanded Purdy, with a wild flicker of hope.

"No; I haven't found Steve; but what I'm honing for is to talk with you about the latest news from the cañon. It may be a help to me in running down Gollifer. Of course you know I'm after that hootin', tootin' trouble-maker, and when I sink my teeth into a proposition I never let go till something gives. Bulldog, regular bulldog, that's me."

CHAPTER X.

BAITING THE TRAP.

IN his own opinion James Budlong Friday was a power. It was his idea that the sun of local authority rose and set in just one person, namely, himself. He was a pest, but he had political pull; and in politics the easiest way to sidetrack a pest is to give him an office in which he can be spectacular without doing much damage. Pressure had been brought to bear upon the sheriff of the county; and solely because that pressure meant votes and influence, Friday was appointed deputy sheriff and assigned to Red Hill.

Eph Rydal was the sheriff; and whenever there was an outbreak of particularly desperate lawlessness he tried hard to maneuver Friday into the danger zone. He opined, it was said, that the best and easiest way to get rid of Friday was to have him honorably killed in the discharge of his duty; but Budlong—or "Bulldog," as he called himself—Friday

was always clever enough to sidestep a fatality.

Of course he had been told to cover Red Hill and vicinity in the law's set-to with Bendigo Bart Gollifer; and Friday was taking care of his assignment largely by formulating plans and making heavy preparations for a campaign that was slow in reaching the active stage. He was the type of man who is always getting ready to explode a bomb of splendid results, but has happened to mislay his matches.

He drew Purdy into one corner of the hotel office, quizzed him in low, authoritative tones, and glowered as if he was on the verge of making a standing jump into the thick of things.

Again Purdy rehearsed the events leading up to the disappearance of Willing. Friday listened with a knowing look; and then he wanted to know how many rods it was from the bend of the cañon to the placer, how many rods the other way to the point where the stuffed bobcat had been found, what caliber gun Willing had carried that morning, and whether the sun would likely have been in Willing's eyes if he had fired the shot Purdy had heard.

Purdy's loss of the pinto, piling up on his other troubles and worries, had made him as near frantic as an old has-sayamper ever becomes. Friday's questions fretted his nerves and confused his judgment, so that he was all wrong in figuring the rods and had the sun that fateful Tuesday morning rising in the west.

"Look here, Gus," Friday warned him, "you want to talk straighter than that or Eph Rydal will be trying to make out that you shot Steve yourself on account of a row over Mollie Randford. I'm your friend, and I know you're a simple old coot and couldn't possibly plan a piece of strategy like that."

"You're a deputy sheriff," wailed Purdy, "but that don't give you any right to insult me."

"You're talking to the law now, Gus, and the law never insults anybody," snapped Friday; "but you tell me this and give it to me straight: When you saw that message from Gollifer nailed to your door, why didn't you and Willing

make a bee line for Red Hill and bat the whole proposition up to me? You might have gone to Hackaday and told Rydal, only he couldn't have handled it with the same intelligence and rapid action I'd have let loose. It was an opportunity, and you and Steve were criminally careless, or worse, in cutting out the law when it had its first right good chance to do something. Why did you keep back the information? It looks a whole lot like compounding a felony."

Purdy hadn't any idea what "compounding a felony" meant. The term still further confused him, and he fell down in his excuses and at last extricated himself from the difficulty by explaining the exact reason he and Willing had kept the game in their own hands: They wanted the reward money.

"Now, there's only one way you can square yourself, Gus," said Friday, digging down into his resourcefulness and uncovering a scheme; "only one way, and that's by acting as bait."

"Bait?" fluttered Purdy.

Friday nodded and pulled at his long Alkali Ike mustache. "The trap is the cañon and your Pima placerings; Bendigo Bart wants you; he's got Steve already, and now you're his meat. You go out there to the flat and wait. Bendigo Bart will come to drive you off and then—bingo! Bulldog Friday lands on him. Get the idee?"

Purdy drew the back of his hand across his moist forehead. Here was another man who thought Steve had been done for. The weight of this evidence twisted his heart.

"Actin' as bait that a way," he murmured, "sounds sort of desperate. First I know, Jim, there'll be another shot in the cañon, and your bait will disappear. I tell you what I'd like: You find Mollie Randford's Pinto for me."

Friday conjured a canny look to his face. "If I do, Gus," he asked, "will you ride to the cañon and bait the trap?"

"Why, sure, if you put it that way," replied Purdy.

Friday took Purdy by the arm, lifted him from his chair, and led him to the open front door of the hotel. "There's the horse," he remarked, with a wave of his hand.

Purdy stared, rubbed his eyes, and stared again. Could he believe what he saw? There at the hitching pole, in the exact place Pinto had been left three days before, the horse was standing at that moment. The cayuse looked as though he had spent three quiet and uneventful days, and no part of the riding gear was missing.

"Where did you find him, Jim?" Purdy asked.

"Exactly where he stands now," was the surprising answer; "he was there, just like that, when I rode up, turned out my horse, and went into the hotel. There's something just a bit loco about you, Gus," Friday added, "but I'm your friend and giving you the benefit of every doubt."

It was a small mystery as mysteries go, and perhaps relatively unimportant; for that very reason Purdy resented it. Some meddler had been trifling with him when his time was valuable.

"Somebody," observed McCallum, "must have been playin' a joke on Gus."

"Look here, Friday," raged Purdy, "if you did this——"

"Don't you say I did it!" snapped Friday. "I'm a deputy sheriff and not a horse thief. I don't know any more about it than you do, Gus. Anyhow, you made a fair and square bargain with me. If I found the pinto, you were to go back to the cañon and stay there. If Bendigo Bart makes good on his threat, he'll try to run you off, and you can gamble a blue stack that I'll be johnny on the spot and snake him into camp. You do your part, Gus, and I'll do mine."

Purdy paid his bill, got his rifle from behind the counter, and went out to the horse. Pinto hadn't turned a hair. If he had been ridden long or far his appearance didn't show it. Purdy swung up into the saddle and gathered the reins in his hand.

"You want to be blame' sure, Jim, you don't make any miss on your end of it," were his parting words to the deputy sheriff; "it'll take somethin' more'n tall talk to put a crimp into Gollifer."

"Do you mean to insinuate——"

Purdy, however, did not stop to explain; he was too eager to get out of town and make up for lost time.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WORST BLOW.

AN obligation was a sacred thing to Augustus Purdy. He had agreed to return to the cañon and serve as bait for the deputy sheriff's trap; and to the cañon he went forthwith, not even making a detour by way of Tinaja Wells.

The cañon fairly reeked with peace and quiet, but Purdy knew that its placid appearance was merely a mask for war and tragedy. All the way from the mouth of the cañon to the flat he held the rifle ready in both hands and kept shifting his gaze in all directions, on the alert for sudden trouble. Not until he came close to the flat, however, did he see anything to cause alarm.

The first unusual object to come under his eyes was a burro with two water casks balanced on either side of its back. This burro was close to the edge of the flat, chewing on a cottonwood branch. Farther along, under a cottonwood near the corner of the shack, a Mexican was busy piling small boulders on a long, narrow, freshly made mound. The stranger was so busy that he failed to hear Purdy's approach.

"Hey, you!" Purdy yelled, the rifle at his shoulder.

The Mexican jumped, faced around, and immediately throw up his hands. "Don't shoot, señor!" he begged. "Me, I not do anything wrong."

Purdy was suspicious. For all he knew, this Mexican might be one of Gollifer's gang. "Mebby you're all right, and mebbly you ain't," he barked, "but I'm not takin' your word for it. What you doin' here?"

"Me and my compadres dry-wash for gold, señor, mebbys two mile from here in the desert. I come to the creek for *agua*." He nodded toward the burro and the water casks. "*Celebro la ocasion de conocerle a usted,*" he added, contriving an awkward bow with his hands still elevated.

"*Bien y que?*" demanded Purdy, indicating the mound.

Dry-washing for gold was a favorite pastime of the Mexicans, so the explanation sounded plausible. The burro and the water casks gave added plausibility

to the stranger's statement. But if the Mexican came for water, why had he been using a spade? And what was the meaning of that freshly turned earth?

"Me, I find a dead Americano on the flat, all shot in pieces, señor," was the astounding bit of information that fell from the Mexican's lips.

Gruesome shivers chased each other up and down Purdy's spine. "Who was it?" he asked huskily.

The Mexican shook his head. "No sabe, señor; *es muy triste*, but me, I put him away and pile up the stones to keep off the coyotes. *Ay de mi!* It was little, but it was all I could do."

"Don't you know you hadn't ought to have done that?" protested Purdy. "When a hombre's found all shot to pieces in a white man's country, the right thing to do is to tell the sheriff so there can be an inquest. You hadn't any business takin' matters in your own hands, like that."

The Mexican looked puzzled. "I thought I do the only thing that was right," he answered.

"What sort of a lookin' man was he now?" inquired Purdy, slipping out of the saddle and approaching the Mexican, lowering the rifle, but continuing to hold it in readiness for quick action.

"Oh, not so old, señor; plenty fine-looking Americano."

The rest of the description was general and might have fitted a hundred unfortunates.

"Any guns on him?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"Anything else about him—money, personal property, or truck like that? I don't reckon," Purdy added, "that you'd plant anything valuable if you happened to run across it."

More shakes of the head followed. "But one thing I find, señor," said the Mexican. He dipped into the breast of his shirt and drew something into sight. "*Helo aqui.*" With one hand he stretched the object out toward Purdy.

The latter staggered back, and the rifle dropped from his hands. What he saw was a cabinet photograph, a photograph which he instantly recognized. He pulled his shaking fingers across his eyes; then, with a sudden movement, he

snatched the photograph and stared at it wildly.

"Steve, with love from Mollie."

That was what he read, written in a cramped hand across a lower corner of the photograph. A dazed look crossed his face; almost mechanically he moved on to the boulder-heaped mound. He paid no attention to the Mexican; and he would have paid none at the moment to Bendigo Bart had that shifty, red-handed freebooter stepped out of the chaparral with a leveled gun.

There is a difference between imagining a calamity and being brought face to face with the apparently certain evidence of it. So long as Steve Willing's fate was wrapped in mystery there was a chance for hope; but what chance had hope now, with that long mound under Purdy's eyes and that picture of Mollie in his hand? Purdy removed his hat and bowed his head; toppling over against the cottonwood, he stood there listlessly while all his little world seemed to go to rack and ruin.

Steve! His pard! And he had almost allowed himself to suspect that Steve had run away with the gold in that buckskin poke! There was consuming bitterness in that thought for Purdy, braced against the cottonwood and surveying the mound through blurred eyes. He clawed at his throat and tried to pull himself together.

"Where—where's the horse, the star-faced roan?" His voice was hoarse and sounded unfamiliar in his own ears and as though from miles away.

"No caballo, señor," answered the Mexican softly; "he came here afoot, and you can see where he dragged himself if you look."

"Go 'way!" said Purdy, slumping down at the foot of the cottonwood, laying his arms across his lifted knees and burying his face in his arms. "I reckon I got a right to be alone here, if I want. *Vayase usted!*"

The Mexican slipped away to the burro, led the animal off the flat and down to the creek, and there he began filling the casks with a pail.

Purdy could almost see Steve, wounded and crippled, crawling back foot by foot to be with his old pard. Purdy's chest

heaved, and he ground his teeth to keep back a sob.

What business had that fool Mexican putting Steve away like that—without a funeral service, maybe without so much as being wrapped in a blanket.

"Steve," he rasped, a choke in his throat, "I'll get the man that got you; I will, if it's the last thing I ever do! Pard! I reckon that's what pards is for."

CHAPTER XII.

GETTING THINGS MIXED.

THE Mexican finished his work of filling the casks and, with a curious backward glance at the man and the mound, led the burro away with the dripping load. The sun reached mid-heaven and shot its fiery darts directly into the cañon, but Purdy had not stirred from his place nor so much as lifted his head.

He was thinking of Lost Man Gulch and the way he had pulled Steve out of the flood; and he was thinking of the time he broke his leg and how Steve had set it and then toted him thirty miles to a doctor; he was thinking of their gold-hunting together, their many pilgrimages side by side through the thirsty, inhospitable land. Yes; it had been good to have such a pard as Steve.

"I know what I'll do," muttered Purdy; "before I take to Gollifer's trail, I'll drop in at Tinaja Wells, and I'll show Mollie how she had Steve wrong. Mebby Randford will be home, and I can talk things over with him. Mollie's got flowers growin', poppies and things, and I'll have her make me a wreath for—for Steve. I'll bring it back here and lay it on that mound, before ever I start in baitin' the trap for Friday."

He took his own picture of Mollie from his pocket and held that side by side with Steve's.

"Nobody but that girl ever come between Steve and me," he mused, with a twisting pang at his heart; "the first hard words him and me ever had was on account of these pictures!" his eyes blurred again as he revived that experience. "There—there ought to be some sort of a marker for that mound," he told himself.

He thought of making a cross out of ocotillo poles; but that would take too much time, he reasoned, now when every minute counted more than ever. Still, he ought to be doing something for Steve, since stranger hands had robbed him of the chance to do those things which a pard ought to have done.

"Beats all that Mexican didn't have sabe enough to wait!" he mourned.

Then he had an idea; and he got up, thrust one of the pictures into his pocket and fixed the other between two of the small boulders near one end of the mound. He couldn't see very well, and he was hardly himself because of his deep emotions, but Steve's picture of Mollie, there on that mound, would not only serve for identification purposes, but it would also lighten with appropriate sentiment the heavy gloom with which Purdy was struggling.

"I reckon you'd like it, Steve, if you was here to know," muttered Purdy. "You always said I was an old hardshell without any sentiment, and I allow you'd be surprised if you could see me doin' a thing like this. Adios, pard! But I'll be back."

He put on his hat and stumbled away, pausing only to pick up the rifle from the place where he had dropped it. Steeped in melancholy reflections, he climbed into the saddle and rode off.

The air of the desert was like a furnace, but Purdy scarcely noticed it. He rode with his head bowed and his body humped over in the saddle, oblivious in his deep sorrow of the country through which he passed and even of the course he was following; but the horse was headed toward home and could be trusted to keep the trail.

"Hello, Gus!" a voice hailed.

Purdy straightened in his saddle and lifted his head. A flicker of satisfaction crossed his woebegone face. "Well; Sim Randford!" he exclaimed. "I was over in Red Hill three days, lookin' for you. Mollie said you'd gone there."

Randford was a tall man and had the reputation of being "shiftless." He made his living by selling water and baled hay to desert travelers; but how he could live so well on the scanty returns from his water and hay had long been one of

the riddles of the desert. It was popularly supposed that he had something "put by" and was drawing on it to keep his establishment at Tinaja Wells going.

He was middle-aged, slow in movement, and talked with a lazy drawl. His sorrel horse was headed south, but he turned the animal the other way and rode with Purdy.

"I changed my mind about going to Red Hill, Gus," he explained, "and when Mollie told me you had gone over there to look me up I had a mind to ride over; but this Baldy horse was tired, and I wasn't feeling right well myself. And, anyhow, I reckoned it wouldn't take you long to find out I wasn't in Red Hill. Seen anything of Gollifer, yet? Or Steve?"

"I've—I've found out about Steve," said Purdy, with a catch in his voice; "and I'll sure land on Gollifer, but you got to give me time."

"Well, there's lots of time," remarked Randford. "I was on my way to the cañon to see if you'd got back. Now that we've met, I'll ride with you to the Wells. Gus, you're making a mistake trying to find Gollifer. No matter where you look for him, he won't be there."

Purdy ground his teeth. "He killed my pard, Steve Willing," he gritted, lifting his clenched fist, "and I'll either get him, or he'll get me. That shot goes as it lays, Sim."

"What do you mean by saying he killed Steve?" inquired Randford.

Thereupon Purdy told the story that had to do with the new mound on the flat.

"I know just how you feel, Gus," said Randford sympathetically; "still and all, you'll get over it. I always had a suspicion of Steve, somehow; he didn't ring like true metal, same as you do. Mollie, now, she's been all for you right from the start, as you might say."

"He was a good pard," asserted Purdy, "and I won't have anybody say different. I'm on my way to the Wells this minute to tell Mollie she was mistaken about Steve."

"That's too bad, then," deplored Randford; "Mollie went to Hackaday this morning, and maybe she won't be back for a couple of days. She caught a ride

with a freighter from the Kennebec Mine, you having her horse and me wanting this one for my trip to the cañon."

"I won't stop at the Wells then," decided Purdy, "but I'll ride right on to Hackaday."

"Mollie asked me to tell you to come to town, so as to carry out that promise you made her, Gus."

Purdy twisted in his saddle. "What promise?"

"I reckon you'll remember when she tells you; there are some things I know, you understand, and some things I don't."

"I'm pretty loco," admitted Purdy, "and like enough I promised somethin' that's got away from me. But I'll do whatever I said I'd do, if it comes to that."

While they rode the trail, talking as they rode, a man on a star-faced roan galloped into Pima Cañon, up the slope to the flat and, before entering the shack, moved curiously over to the newly made mound. There was a puzzled look on his face as he reached down and lifted the photograph from between the two small boulders.

"Gus, with love from Mollie," he read; and then, suddenly, he uttered a startled exclamation, removed his hat and dropped to his knees.

"Gus," he murmured brokenly, "I was too late; the wolves got you—but they had to sidetrack me for three days before they could do it!"

CHAPTER XIII.

GOING ON THE WARPETH.

DURING the past few days, Augustus Purdy was not the only one who had been shaking hands with Mr. and Mrs. Enigma and their little brood of mysteries. Pard Steve himself was having plenty to unravel.

In Steve's case, however, there was a difference: Purdy's mysteries were of recent date, while Willing had been doing a lot of wondering for more than two months. Willing had carefully concealed his state of mind from Purdy, mainly because the conviction had developed that Purdy somehow was a victim marked for slaughter, and Willing wanted to get at

all the angles of the plot and defeat it before calamity overwhelmed his pard. Had he been confidential with his suspicions, Purdy would have resented his activities as officious and uncalled-for.

Heredity and environment are master workmen; and they had compounded Purdy's character after a strange formula. Into the crucible of his nature, with artless simplicity as a base, they had dropped a double handful of superstition, equal parts of courage and loyalty, and a large amount of independence. Then, evidently thinking he had been endowed with too much independence, they offset it with a generous dash from a bottle marked "Influence of Others." As if this were not enough to make Purdy a human riddle, Heredity insisted on just a touch of egotism, while Environment stirred in a little recklessness and a little stubbornness.

During the two years of their close companionship, Willing had analyzed his pard's nature pretty thoroughly; and he had made himself agreeable to Purdy by deferring to his peculiarities. In that, perhaps more than in anything else, Willing displayed his good judgment and his depth of understanding. He had "managed" Purdy unobtrusively but successfully—until the two of them began calling, turn about, at Tinaja Wells.

Willing's fancy had not been captivated by Mollie Randford; but, feeling that the girl had somehow marked Purdy for sacrifice, Willing had been making regular calls at Tinaja Wells in his pard's interest entirely and not at all in his own. He wanted to discover just what the marked cards meant in the game that Randford and his niece were playing. The light began to dawn upon him when he found the thief raiding Geronimo for the poke of dust and nuggets; and sudden suspicion had influenced him to overhaul the thief and settle the matter of his identity.

In this he failed; and when he had been snatched out of his saddle by the rope noose, an astounding revelation had been postponed by the consummate trickery of a man gifted in stratagems.

When Willing awoke to a full realization of his predicament he was in the bottom of an old, deserted mine shaft. The

shaft was fifty feet deep, and the stone walls were perpendicular. Escape, with any means at his command, was impossible. And right there, for Willing, the mysteries began to thicken.

For three days he was a prisoner, seeing nothing of his jailers. Food and water were lowered to him at intervals by unseen hands; and it was not until Purdy had returned to the cañon from Red Hill, and had left the cañon again for Tinaja Wells, that Willing was released.

The manner of his release was as incomprehensible as the manner in which he had been imprisoned. A rope was lowered from the top of the shaft, and Willing climbed it. There was no one waiting on the surface to explain matters, and the only living object in sight was Star. The horse had been well-cared-for, apparently, and all his trappings were in place. Nor had Willing been deprived of his six-gun, for that had been with him all the time he was in the bottom of the shaft.

Bewildered and curious, Willing mounted the horse and rode back to the cañon; then, finding the mound and the picture, he felt that he knew why he had been forcibly detained in the hills for the preceding three days. With him out of the way, Gollifer had found it easy to work his nefarious will with Purdy.

Willing condemned himself in bitter terms for not having been more confidential with Purdy in the matter of his suspicions. Purdy would not have taken any stock in his bold surmises, but nevertheless they might have placed him on his guard. Willing's self-condemnation as he stood over the mound gave way presently to the desire for vengeance.

"I'll square your account with the man who did this, Gus!" he declared. "And I'll do it before the day is over."

He went into the shack. The one room was just as he and Purdy had left it on that morning when they went to the placer, armed, to work at their diggings and to wait for Bendigo Bart to show his hand. And yet, not everything was the same. The stuffed bobcat was missing. That was an inconsequential point, however, and Willing was more relieved than grieved at the absence of Geronimo. In

that drab hour when Willing was thinking only of what was best and noblest in his lost pard, the bobcat would have reminded him of one of his pard's greatest failings.

Willing still wore the rubber boots and the soggy work clothes in which he had left the placerings three days before. He now changed into a more comfortable costume—something in which he could fight, if it was necessary, to better advantage.

He was going on the warpath. His suspicions had intensified and, while he still lacked convincing evidence on several dark points, he felt that he was sufficiently well informed to warrant activities of a drastic nature. The sad fate of his pard was calling for immediate action.

Willing looked to the six-gun. There was one empty shell in the cylinder, and he replaced it with a loaded cartridge. The cartridges left in the box he transferred to one of his pockets.

He was ready now. With one parting glance around the room he left the shack and leaped into his saddle. At the mound he halted Star for a moment.

"I'm going to settle your bill, Gus!" he declared, with emotion. "Before the sun goes down it will be receipted in full, or there'll be another mound here on the flat."

He turned the horse, jerked his hat brim down to shade his eyes, and raced from the flat to the path that edged the creek. He was not deceiving himself as to the nature of his enterprise, for he knew he had more than one killer to contend with; but he welcomed the venture, and all the dangers attending it, as a relief to the sorrow that filled him and the self-condemnation that continued to manifest itself.

He was late in going about his present business; three days late, and poor old Gus had paid the penalty for the delay.

Two years previously Willing had come into those deserts a weakling; but the deserts had restored his health, and the hard life of a prospector under the trained guidance of Purdy had made him a man to be reckoned with. Now he would prove his quality; now he would acquit himself with credit in an affair in-

volving one of the sternest reckonings one man can demand of another.

Had the deserts done no more than to equip him successfully for that enterprise, he would have accounted it enough.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAN TO MAN.

DISMOUNTING and leaving Star in the shade of a cottonwood, Willing found the proprietor of Tinaja Wells taking his afternoon comfort on the porch of the adobe house.

Randford was lounging in a large cane rocker, a chair which Mollie usually reserved for herself. On his right was a footstool on which stood an Indian basket piled with balls of yarn. On top of the balls lay some knitting, just as Mollie had left it. On Randford's left was a small but heavy table. On top of the table was a scattered deck of playing cards, a tin can of smoking tobacco, and a box of matches.

Randford, it seemed, had been playing solitaire. He was stripped to his shirt sleeves and had a pipe between his lips.

He had full warrant, in view of what he had heard from Purdy, to show some surprise on seeing Steve Willing, but no sign of such a feeling was in evidence. A furtive light flickered into his eyes and flickered out again, but it reflected something other than amazement.

"Buenos, Steve!" he drawled, shifting languidly in his chair. "You've got more nerve than I have to be on the go at this time of day. Sit down."

There was a second rocker on the other side of the table. Willing lowered himself into it.

"As I remember it, Sim," remarked Willing, in a casual manner, "there's a little bunch of crucifixion thorn just west of your garden patch."

He watched Randford's face sharply as he spoke, but not a line in it changed.

"This country's full of thorns, Steve," answered Randford easily, "but I never tried to classify 'em. The less exertion you put yourself to in this climate the better you're off."

He leaned forward to knock the ashes from his pipe on the porch rail and then calmly reached for the tobacco can.

"And was that what you rode over here for in the heat of the day, Steve?" he inquired. "Just to talk about what you call the crucifixion thorn?"

"No," replied Willing; "there's something else on my mind."

Willing knew that he was pitting his powers against an antagonist who was both sly and resourceful. In a few minutes words would pass which must lead to an encounter, and he studied Randford in an effort to determine whether he had a gun handy. There was no indication that any sort of weapon was within his reach.

"When Gus came over here, some time ago," Willing went on, "he told Mollie about that stuffed bobcat of his."

Randford laughed softly. "Gus is more kinds of a fool than you would reckon, just from looking at him," he remarked.

"He has his weaknesses, I suppose," said Willing, following the other's lead and playing up Purdy in the present rather than in the past; "but he's straight goods, Sim."

"Probably," was the other's comment, "he hasn't sense enough to go crooked. You might as well tell me what you've got on your mind, Steve. It's sticking out all over you that you're not here on a social visit."

"I wish you'd call Mollie," Willing requested; "she'll probably be interested in what I've got to say."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but Mollie's in Hackaday for a spell. She went there this morning; and about an hour ago Gus passed here on his way to town, bound to see her as quick as he could in order to prove to her that you weren't a thief and hadn't dug out of the cañon with a buckskin bag of dust and nuggets."

Willing reached for his bag of tobacco and a square of rice paper. What was he to make out of that statement of Randford's? Gus had passed there an hour before on his way to town! Was that a lie, or was it the truth? If a lie, what was the object of it? If the truth, who or what was under that freshly turned mound on the flat? Willing felt a great hope suddenly rising in him; but he did not betray himself, nor try to

play the game otherwise than as Randford was playing it.

"Mollie, then," Willing went on, "has an idea that I'm a thief?"

"Look at it square in the face, Steve. You leave Gus at your placings; Gus hears a shot; he rushes around the bend of the cañon to find that you are gone and that the wildcat cache has been looted. Any man with a proper amount of sabe could have thought only just one thing; Gus wasn't able to think it, but every one else did."

"Do you happen to be informed, Sim, how Gus is going to prove to Mollie that I didn't do what every one else thinks I did?"

"Why," chuckled Randford, "the poor fool has an idea that every long mound hides a dead man and that you're under a new mound on the flat. If you were really there, as Gus believes, you couldn't very well be somewhere else with your partnership gold."

Willing had come to Tinaja Wells with the idea that he was to deliver all the surprises; up to that moment, however, Randford had taken the part away from him.

"You disappeared, Steve," Randford went on, "and the gold disappeared. You have been numbered among the missing for several days; then, all at once, a long mound shows itself on the flat. 'Bendigo Bart!' says poor old Gus; 'he's done for Steve and that's where he's put him.' Get the idea? Not much use trying to tell Gus anything about Pard Steve."

Willing allowed this fog to clear from his mind a little; then he took another tack. "I suppose you have heard how Bendigo Bart fastened a message to our door," he resumed, "ordering us to leave the cañon."

"Sure; Gus must have told all about that a dozen times. He seems to think Bendigo Bart is one of the supermen who can be in two places at once. As a matter of fact, all this talk about Bendigo Bart is fairy stuff. There's no such man. Whenever somebody happens to be shot up, or a robbery committed, and Rydal can't pick up a clew, there's talk right off about the 'spook outlaw.' Shucks! It's the legal machinery of this county that's

lame and usin' the spook outlaw for a crutch. There's no such man as Golli-fer."

"I believe you, Sim," agreed Willing, "and I'm glad you brought up that side of the proposition. Bendigo Bart signed that message fastened to our door, and he skewered it to the planks with a crucifixion thorn four inches long."

"Interesting, Steve," said Randford, "but not what you'd call important."

"Depends on the way you look at it, Sim. The man who took our bag of gold knew just where to go to look for it. The only person who knew about that cache, apart from Gus and myself, was your niece, Molly."

"Meaning?" Randford's eyes began to narrow.

"Meaning, to put it straight, that Mollie told you, and you came to the cañon and looted the bobcat. Steady, Sim!" Willing's six-gun was out and leveled at Randford across the table. "First off, you'll get that gold and lay it here between us. After that, we'll talk about something else that's equally interesting and even more important."

CHAPTER XV.

PUZZLING STRATEGY.

IN spite of Willing's accusation and demand, Randford's manner was so mild and complaisant as to suggest guile, working under cover. The proprietor of Tinaja Wells smiled affably.

"I always told Mollie, and she agreed with me," he observed, "that the only head with any sense in it over at Pima Cañon was on the shoulders of Steve Willing. If you hadn't hovered Gus under your protecting wing, Steve, I could have got to him for what I wanted a long time ago. You've been right plumb in my way ever since you and Gus settled down on Pima Flat."

"I'm talking about the gold, Sim," Willing reminded him sharply; "fork over!"

"Don't be rude or violent, Steve," admonished Randford; "you've got the only piece of hardware in my vicinity, and your hand is full of trumps. You'll get the gold; but first you're going to get a few facts that couldn't come from any-

body but me, and not even from me if this moment wasn't so ripe with possibilities. If you're bound to keep me covered, rest your elbow on the table, for I've got to have a few minutes, and that will make your arm a lot steadier."

Willing had to admire Randford's coolness and his mastery of himself; nevertheless, he kept the six-gun leveled and was on the alert for something unexpected.

Randford resumed, in his slow drawl: "Those Pima placerings belong to me by right of discovery and——"

"What!" exclaimed Willing exultantly. "Then I was right even in that, and you're——"

"Wait a minute; bottle up for a spell, Steve, and let me do the talking. I discovered those placerings, but I had personal reasons for not filing on them. My brother, Amos Gulliver Randford, runs a boarding house in Tucson, and Mollie is his girl and helps him. When I acquired Tinaja Wells, I sent for Mollie to come over here, calculating that she could help me out with those placerings and that I could make it worth her while. My plan was for her to file on 'em, and by a private understanding between us I'd be her silent partner. Then, when we got all ready, I discovered that you and Gus had beaten us to it. You didn't scare worth a cent, and it was up to Mollie and me to make some other move.

"When Gus spilled the beans about the bobcat cache, that helped. I had more right to that gold than you and Gus—moral if not legal—so I went after it. I could have used my rifle and shot you out of your saddle any time I wanted to, but Mollie wouldn't stand for anything like that. We had to put you out of the way for a while, though, so we could handle Gus; and that's where the old shaft came in. The only trouble with that was that Enrique let you out about a day too soon. I was here at the Wells waiting to maneuver Gus into Hackaday, and Enrique got his orders mixed.

"Enrique did well with that mound on the flat. Gus was all up in the air, and Mollie and I were trying to make him think that you had dug out with the horse and the bag of dust, but somehow he took a brace and wouldn't fall for it;

so I had Enrique fix up that mound, and bury that stuffed bobcat. As long as Gus had that, he reckoned he was charmed against trouble. We had to get that out of his possession, and it was necessary to convince him in some way that you were gone for good.

"Gus had borrowed Mollie's horse and gone to Red Hill; Enrique's brother, Pablo, trailed him to the town and took Mollie's pinto from in front of the McCallum House where Gus had left the horse. Pablo kept Pinto at a water hole in the hills, close to Red Hill, for three days, and then sneaked him back to the place he'd been taken from. So, Steve, while you were in the old shaft, and Gus was blockaded in Red Hill, we fixed up our little scheme at Pima Flat.

"When Gus got back to the flat, Enrique was waiting for him; and Enrique told Gus how he had found an Americano all shot to pieces by your shack and had taken all that trouble to put him away. Gus never doubted the yarn for a minute; and he jumped right off to the conclusion that you had crawled back to the flat and that the Mexican had planted you without waiting to take the matter up with the sheriff. I was riding over to the cañon to see Gus. I knew he would be pretty badly demoralized and in just the state of mind to be comfortably handled.

"Something more than an hour ago Gus left here for Hackaday. He has gone to see Mollie, tell her of your hard fate, and convince her in that way that his old pard couldn't have played the treacherous part she had expressed herself as thinking he had done. That's all, Steve. Gus is in Hackaday by this time, and I can trust Mollie to carry out the rest of the scheme."

Randford settled back comfortably in his chair, struck a match and coolly trailed the flame across his pipe bowl. When he had finished his queer confession, there was an ominous glitter in Willing's eyes.

"I knew all along," said Willing through his teeth, "that you and the girl were making some sort of a play for the placerings. Sly as you are, and clever as I know you to be, Randford, I can't begin to guess why you have told all this.

A meaner enterprise no man with a heart in him could set his hand to. You and your niece went deliberately to work to demoralize poor old Gus; and that his feelings should have commanded respect never once occurred to you. He has lived his life in the deserts; he's simple; he's superstitious; but he's a man from his hat to his boot soles.

"You and the girl have fooled him," Willing continued; "and you have about broken his heart with silly stratagems that a ten-year-old boy, raised in the settlements, would have laughed at. And here you tell me all about it, and there was a mean chuckle in that throat of yours as you talked. You're a low-down, coyote sort of person; and while my original estimate of you wasn't flattering, it was a whole lot too high for the sort of heartless tinhorn you've confessed yourself to be. And what does this revelation of yours get you?"

Even that, apparently, did not get under Randford's skin. He looked at Willing and grinned craftily.

"By this time," he remarked, "Mollie has got half of Gus' interest in the Pima placerings. She knows how to play her cards for a quit-claim. Part of a loaf, Willing, is better than no bread at all. We've watched your work, and we know what those placerings are worth."

"You forget," snapped Willing, "that I'm here to balk that move."

"You're too far from Hackaday to balk anything. I led you to believe that your hand held all the trumps. But that's where you were shy a few." He reached into the Indian basket, dug under the balls of yarn, and brought up the buckskin bag. As he dropped it on the table he added: "There's the gold, but don't try to take it. Shift your eyes to the door behind you."

Willing flashed a glance to the rear. In the doorway stood a Mexican with a leveled rifle at his shoulder. The point was within six feet of Willing, and a beady eye looked at him over the sights.

"You see how it is," went on Randford comfortably; "whatever I miss in the draw, I usually make up for in the play. I've been talking cold facts, but they won't do you any good, or Gus, either."

CHAPTER XVI.

INTO THE TRAP.

WHEN Purdy, sore beset, left Tinaja Wells for Hackaday, there was but one clear thought in his foggy mind. The thought had been planted there in such masterly fashion by Randford that it dominated everything in Purdy's dreary outlook upon life.

He had promised Mollie Randford something. What had he promised her? And when had he promised it? Although Purdy racked his tortured wits he could not remember the first thing about any promise he had given Mollie.

If it were a recent promise—a promise, say, since he had found out about Steve's mysterious disappearance—there was ample excuse for his forgetfulness. He could recall only one item of the conversation that had passed between him and Mollie when he called at the Wells to borrow Pinto, and that had to do with the veiled suspicion that Steve had taken the poke of dust and nuggets, and roan Star, and left the country. Whatever else was said on that occasion was a closed book to Purdy.

Well, anyhow, he told himself, he was a man of his word; and if he had made a promise of any kind he would stand by it. Randford wouldn't tell him what the promise was; but Mollie would tell him, and he would take her word for it. Now that he had lost Steve, Mollie was his best friend.

If Mollie wasn't at the Grand Central Hotel, Randford had instructed Purdy to look for her at Riff Kadew's office. Kadew was a lawyer with an unsavory reputation, clever at skating on the thin ice of the law without breaking through. Purdy knew all this, but it did not occur to him; and if it had occurred to him he was not in a mental condition to draw any logical deductions.

He dismounted in front of the hotel, went into the office, an inquired for Miss Randford. She was not there. He went across the street and, half a block down, climbed an outside stairway to the office of Riff Kadew. There he found Mollie and the hatchet-faced, bullet-eyed Kadew. Kadew was at his dusty, disordered desk and had evidently just been reading

a legal-looking paper to the girl when Purdy stepped into the room.

"Gus!" cried Mollie, jumping up and putting out her hands. "Uncle Sim said he'd get you here, but I was wonderin' if he'd make it. Mr. Kadew has everything all ready for you to sign."

"Sign?" echoed Purdy blankly. "What am I to sign, Mollie?"

The girl dropped his hands and recoiled, a look of amazement in her face. "You don't mean to say that you've forgot about it, Gus?" she gasped. "You've always been wanting to give me something to show the—the high regard you say you have for me; and the other day, when you came after Pinto, and I didn't feel as though I could let the horse go, you said I could name my own price for Pinto because you had to have a horse to use in runnin' down Bendigo Bart Gollifer. Don't it come back to you, Gus?"

Purdy shook his head. "I can't remember much about what I said, Mollie," he told her; "you see," he explained, "I was so upset about what had happened in the cañon. But I can remember you thought Steve had played a low-down trick on me; and I want you to know, Mollie, it isn't so. My pard was shot down by Bendigo Bart, and he's—he's layin' up there on our flat now, under a—under a mound of earth and rocks—and——"

Purdy's voice broke. He turned away his face and swallowed hard in an effort to control his emotions.

Mollie went to him, took him by the shoulders, and gently forced him into a chair.

"I know just how you feel," she said, her voice athrob with sympathy. "I done Steve a wrong by sayin' what I did, and I'm mighty sorry. Maybe you'd better put off what you was goin' to do till some other time, Gus?"

"No," returned Purdy, making a hard effort and getting himself in hand; "I'm here to do whatever I said I'd do. What was it?"

Kadew spoke up: "Purdy, as I get it from Miss Randford, you were to quit-claim to her, in return for one pinto horse, an undivided half interest in your undivided half interest in the Pima placer-

ings. All you've got to do to finish the transaction and make good your word is to sign on the dotted line. I don't know how much that placer claim is worth, but the instance has been known," and here he chuckled, "when a king offered his kingdom for a horse."

Purdy stared incredulously at the lawyer. "Is—is that what I did?" he inquired, drawing a shaking hand over his forehead.

"It comes to me as a straight-out agreement," said Kadew.

"If you've changed your mind, Gus," put in Mollie, "we'll forget about it."

Purdy tried to consider the matter. How was he, alone now, to rig up that sluice, divert the Pima above the bench, and develop the placerings as Steve had planned? It wasn't in Purdy himself to do that. He needed a bright mind to assist in the work. Maybe he had been thinking of that when he promised half of his interest to Mollie for Pinto.

"I'm standing by everything I said I'd do; and if you say that was the agreement, Mollie, I'll carry it out right now."

Kadew smiled at Mollie, and Mollie looked vastly relieved. The lawyer dipped a pen in the ink and presented it to Purdy. Then, as Purdy started to get out of his chair, the office door opened suddenly, and Eph Rydal stepped into the room.

"Hello, Eph!" greeted Purdy. "I was aimin' to come around and see you, pretty soon."

"Well, I didn't wait, Purdy," said the sheriff officiously; "I just got word from Red Hill that Steve Willing has mysteriously disappeared. Until we clear that up, you'll have to come with me."

He dropped a hand on Purdy's shoulder, pulled him to his feet, and began slapping his pockets in a quest for guns.

"What're you thinkin' anyhow, Eph?" quavered Purdy.

"I won't go into that, because I'm hoping for the best," was the reply.

Snap, snap! Before Purdy realized what was happening, a pair of steel bracelets had encircled his wrists. He sank limply into his chair again.

"You might take off those handcuffs, Eph," suggested Kadew, "until Purdy signs this paper."

"He's not signing any papers until this other business is settled, Kadew."

There was finality in that, and the lawyer tossed his hands and laid down his pen.

"I think this is the limit!" snapped Mollie Randford.

"Like enough, ma'am," agreed the sheriff, "but the law usually goes the limit if it goes anywhere. Come on, Purdy!" Once more he pulled Purdy to his feet, thrust an arm under his elbow, and drew him toward the door.

"But Steve's been shot down by Ben-digo Bart, Eph," cried Purdy, "and he's layin' up on our flat, by the corner of the shack——"

"So that's the latest, is it?" queried Rydal; "well, I hope you can make it stick. But you'll have to excuse me for having my doubts."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TABLES TURNED.

THE situation at Tinaja Wells was even more tense than the situation in Kadew's office in Hackaday. On one side of a table sat Willing, holding a six-gun leveled at Randford on the other side of the table. Between them lay the bag of gold. Back of Willing in the open door of the adobe stood a Mexican with a rifle. If Willing fired, he sealed his own doom, and at the very instant he called Randford to a grim accounting. The matter had progressed to a point where it had become a gamble in lives. If Steve Willing had ever had any bright thoughts, now was the time for them.

"You're supposed to be up in the cañon under the mound, Steve," remarked Randford coolly, "and the only thing in the world for me to do, in spite of Mollie's feelings in the matter, is to make that supposition the correct one."

"Your Mexican can kill me," answered Willing, "but not before I finish you. Tell him to step out on the porch and put down the gun."

What Randford intended to do next is problematical; no doubt he had every adverse point carefully covered, for otherwise he would not have indulged in such reckless incrimination of himself; yet plans wait upon circumstances, and just

here Randford's strategy ran into the unexpected.

After his quick side glance at the Mexican with the rifle, Willing never allowed his eyes to stray from Randford's face. He watched like a cat at a rat hole, motionless, and ready to interpret with swift action the slightest turn of expression that might lead to deviltry.

Randford, lolling back in the cane rocker, was looking toward the trail in front of the house. He straightened suddenly, his face twisting with an odd touch of amazement.

"Never mind that trick!" snapped Willing. "It's too old. You're not looking at any one, and I'm not giving you your chance by shifting my eyes. Give the Mexican his orders—pronto!"

Then Willing, with something like a shock, was disillusioned. A voice came from close at hand, on the other side of the porch rail:

"The first hombre that moves, except to do as I say, gets his. You greaser there! Come out and flock with these other two—and hold that gun by the muzzle while you're doin' it. Throw that hardware of yours over the rail, Willing. I've got the call this round, and you fellows move lively!"

Randford's face broke into a wide smile, a smile of pleasure and satisfaction. "Right in the nick of time, Bulldog!" he called. "Here's where you meet Bendigo Bart Gollifer, big as life! This is once you score, and in a way that will make Rydal take off his hat to you. Follow orders, Enrique," he added; "here's the law stepping in, and we're not on our own any more."

Enrique shuffled out through the open door and tossed the gun, butt first, from the porch.

"Did you hear what I said, Willing?" yelled Friday, the deputy sheriff.

"I heard what you said, Friday," answered Willing, "but I'm going to keep this man covered till you get the wrist irons on him."

Randford laughed. "And there's nerve—telling a limb of the law what he'll do and won't do. Friday, this honest miner from Pima Cañon, this man you know as Steve Willing, is none other than Gollifer."

Friday was hanging over the porch rail with a gun in each fist. His eyes were popping, and his drooping mustache fairly bristled. "If I speak to you ag'in, Willing," he yelled, "it'll be with a lead slug. I want that gun—now!"

Willing leaned back and threw it over the rail. "Watch your step, Friday," he warned; "you're not dealing with an ordinary tinhorn. Randford himself is Gollifer."

"You can't pull the wool over Bulldog Friday's eyes with any such talk," said Randford with easy confidence; "Friday wasn't born yesterday; I know him." He went on to the deputy: "This is the chap, Bulldog, who ran away from the cañon the other day on a horse belonging jointly to him and to Gus Purdy, taking gold they owned in common when he went. You see the roan under that cottonwood? And the gold—there it is in the poke on the table. I had got this far with the man you know as Willing when you arrived. But it's your reward money, and I can't claim any of it."

Friday must have jotted that down very pleasantly. It was also pleasant to hear himself extolled in those terms of admiration and confidence to which Randford was giving expression. At last Friday was doing something, something big, something Rydal himself had not been able to do. A lofty satisfaction filled him; if he had only had a free hand he would have liked to pat himself on the shoulder.

"Where's Gus?" he demanded. "I told him to stay at the cañon, and he ain't there."

"He's in Hackaday, Bulldog, and he left here maybe two hours ago," Randford answered. "By George," he added, piling his encomiums on thick, "I always said you'd show the natives a thing or two, and here's where you're doing it! Good work, Bulldog!"

"Just a minute," interposed Willing, twisting around in his chair so that he could face the deputy sheriff; "I'm telling you, Friday, that Randford is Gollifer; that he stole the gold belonging to Purdy and me; that he kept me holed up in an old shaft in the hills for three days while he worked some of his deviltry; and as for that bag of gold, he dug it up

and laid it on the table not more than twenty minutes ago. Get that right."

"He's smooth, Bulldog; I'll say that for him," jeered Randford; "but that's his only hope, now that Bulldog Friday has him cornered."

"He can't juggle with me, not for a minute," snarled Friday; "I'm acquainted with his sort, and all he says goes in at one ear and out at the other."

"Mainly," was Willing's dry comment, "because there's nothing in there to stop it."

This, perhaps, was an unfortunate remark. Adulation curried more favor with Friday than any plain recital of facts. Something in what Willing said stung him. He climbed over the rail, snuggled the revolver in his left hand under his right arm, and dragged a pair of steel handcuffs from his coat pocket.

"You Willing, otherwise Gollifer," he ordered, "put out your hands!"

Willing put them out, but not in the way that Friday was expecting. The right hand was doubled, and the fist caught the deputy on the point of the chin. The left hand caught the gun as it dropped from Friday's armpit, and then the right hand wrenched the other gun away from him.

The swiftness of the maneuver would have delighted the eye that could have followed it. The handcuffs had rattled down on the porch floor, and Friday was breathing hard and holding himself erect by clinging to a porch post. Randford was making a hurried move to the right, and Enrique to the left when Willing yelled:

"As you were! I've two guns and am pretty good at shooting with either hand. Friday, as soon as you're able, pick up those cuffs and snap them on Randford's wrists. If you happen to have two pairs of bracelets, attend to the Mexican in the same way. I'm talking now, and don't try to say no to me."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLEANING UP.

THERE was no denying that Bulldog Friday had sunk his teeth into a proposition at last and, in spite of his boasts, had been shaken loose. Yet, even

so, he had extended himself in a way to surprise those who knew best his nature and his pretensions.

Willing was thankful, for Friday's intervention had made it necessary for Randford to change his tactics; and in that change Willing had found his chance to fit the boot on the other leg. If Friday had been less dense, less amenable to the shrewd flattery of Randford, that affair on the porch of the adobe might have progressed without jar to the deputy's feelings and without violence.

Friday was Friday, however, and had to be manhandled. Catching his breath, the deputy released the porch post and settled down on the porch rail. He glowered, but nevertheless he surveyed Willing with heightened respect.

"What d'you think you're doin'?" he demanded wildly. "I'm the law in this spot on the map, and what you've done will be charged against you."

Willing was planted in such a way that he could command the three in front of him; but it was to be noted that while the gun in his left hand fanned back and forth to cover both the deputy and the Mexican, the gun in his right never shifted from the alert and scheming Randford.

"Friday," said Willing, "you're the author of your own disgrace. You chose to take Randford's word against mine, and he lied by the clock. He stole the gold that belongs to Purdy and me; and he's the Bendigo Bart Gollifer who has been so hard to find because he has been right here under your nose at Tinaja Wells all the time; but the worst thing he's done, the meanest, lowest-down thing he has done, is the complicated deviltry he's been heaving at Gus Purdy."

"Watch out for him, Bulldog!" warned Randford. "Any man of your sense and sagacity——"

"That's enough of that!" Willing cut in. "Another word out of you, Randford, and you'll be using your soft sawder to find a cool spot in a hot place. Step to that corner porch post on your right! Quick now!"

Randford backed up to the post.

"About face," Willing went on, "and put your arms around it."

Randford did that, too; there was

something in Willing's eyes that enforced obedience to his every order.

"Now, Friday," Willing continued, kicking the handcuffs toward the deputy, "snap those on his wrists, and see that you keep his arms around the post while you're doing it!"

It was a thoughtful proceeding, for it not only restrained Randford in the use of his arms, but likewise chained him to a certain spot from which he could be taken later on. Friday attended to his end of the work, not very cheerfully, but with thoroughness; his misfortunes had stirred the yellow streak in him, and he had a wholesome fear of this man who might, after all, be Gollifer.

While this was going forward, Enrique thought he saw his chance. He made a bound for the open door of the house. Although Willing had a lot to attend to, he was not losing sight of Enrique. A shot would have halted the Mexican, but Willing had done so well without gun play that he hated to spoil his record. He leaped after the fleeing Enrique, overhauled him in the front room of the house, and dragged him back to the porch.

While that was going on, Friday vaulted the porch rail and gathered in the rifle Enrique had discarded a few minutes previously.

"Now then," he yelled, "you dance to my music! You——"

Willing stepped behind Enrique and leveled a six-gun across his shoulder.

"I'm about out of patience with you, Friday," he complained; "put that rifle back where you found it. You can kill this Mexican, but you can't touch me; and if you try that, Eph Rydal will be looking up another deputy sheriff for Red Hill."

The logic in that appealed to Friday. He dropped the gun sullenly. "Oh, well," he grunted, "this ain't the end of this."

"No," agreed Willing; "you're right about that." His eyes ranged toward the cottonwood where a buckskin broncho was standing beside Star. "Get that rope from your saddle, Friday," he ordered, stepping down from the porch and picking up the rifle; "and if you try to mount and ride while you're doing it,

there'll be an empty saddle on that buckskin."

Friday got the rope and made no attempt to mount and flee. He was thoroughly cowed; and in that condition he made an excellent aid. Under Willing's instructions, the deputy began tying Enrique—hands at his back and feet at the ankles. This accomplished, Willing made a close examination of the work to be sure that it was properly done. Giving it his approval, he turned to pick up his own six-shooter and push it into his belt. He was now in possession of all the firearms in sight, and his difficulties were gradually vanishing.

"We will now take a little pasear around the oasis, Friday," Willing resumed. "There are more of Randford's men somewhere, and I want to be sure they're not in this vicinity. Go to the corral first."

He forced Friday to take the lead. There was a sorrel horse in the corral, and the riding gear was hanging over the corral fence. Friday was told to put the gear on the sorrel; and, when that had been done, to lead the horse to the cottonwood. Willing found another coiled reata, and he took it along. One end of it he made fast to the roan's saddle, passed the free end through the sorrel's bit rings and made a hitch, then carried the free end on to the buckskin and made another hitch. After that, the exploration of the oasis was continued.

In a tangle of brush beyond the lower end of Randford's truck patch a discovery was made. Two horses were neatly hidden in the chaparral, both under saddle; one of the animals was a white horse, and the other was a bay. Hung on the bushes was an outfit of clothes—clothes which Willing recognized just as he had recognized the bay horse.

"Randford's Gollifer outfit, Friday," Willing remarked. "He uses the bay horse in his outlaw ventures, and of course he doesn't keep the animal at the Wells. Enrique brought him in, along with the Bendigo Bart clothes. Tie those clothes to the cantle of the bay's saddle, and then turn the caballo blanco into the corral. We'll only need the bay."

"Where are you goin'?" demanded Friday.

"We're all going to Hackaday, to leave Randford and Enrique at the big stone yamen; and you're going along, Friday, to report to your chief. I'm in something of a hurry, too, because I'm pretty sure Gus will be needing me."

Friday looked depressed. Reporting to his chief, in the circumstances, was an added touch of bitterness in his cup of misfortunes.

"Why—why not let me have a hand in it?" he asked.

"Because I can't trust you, Friday," Willing replied. "Randford might begin telling you what a wonder you are, and then you'd do something to make trouble. Step lively! We've got to be hitting the trail."

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHANGE OF MIND.

IN the sheriff's office in the county jail, Augustus Purdy, the prisoner, sat between Eph Rydal and a husky turnkey known as "Big" Dan Brisco. Big Dan was six feet two in his stockings and built like a pugilist. The officials were getting ready for some amateur third-degree work when the office door opened and Mollie Randford walked in.

"All I want, Mr. Sheriff," said Mollie, "is for Gus to sign this paper. It don't mean a thing in whatever you've got against him, but it certainly does mean a whole lot to me."

The sheriff started to his feet, leaned over, and quickly caught the paper out of the girl's hand. It was a deft move, and plainly one the girl had not counted on. She voiced a protest, but it went unheeded.

"So," muttered Rydal, "Purdy was giving you an interest in his Pima placer for one dollar, in hand paid, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, a painted cayuse, and other good and sufficient consideration. That gravel bench must be a whole lot less valuable than I was given to believe, or else there's something rotten in Denmark."

"Is that what the paper says?" rumbled Big Dan. "Say, Eph, I'll say the trouble's in Denmark."

"You sit down, Miss Randford," went on Rydal; "Dan and I were just getting

ready to talk to Gus, and maybe you'd like to hear."

The girl seated herself a little uncertainly and snatched rather than took the paper the sheriff handed to her. Then the sheriff whirled on the prisoner.

"Look here, Purdy!" He caught the prisoner under the chin with his flat hand and roughly flung back the bowed head. "You and Steve were calling on this girl every night, turn about. That so?"

"Well, it was like this, Eph," began Purdy; "we——"

"Yes or no?" thundered the sheriff.

Purdy cringed, drew his hand across his forehead dazedly, and nodded.

"That's a situation that has caused more killings than you can count," went on the sheriff. "You and Steve got into a row over Mollie Randford; then you killed Steve and framed a yarn that he'd lifted the horse and the gold and made tracks. All you did that for was to cover what you'd done. That was the way of it; you know it, and we know it, so you might as well come clean."

Purdy's leathery face went ghastly white under its tan. The wrinkles deepened about his eyes, and he clawed at his throat. He had been hard beset for several days, and here was the culmination—he was accused of killing his own pard!

"It wasn't me killed him," he whispered hoarsely; "it was Bendigo Bart."

Big Dan grabbed him by the collar and drew him half across his knees so he could glare into his eyes. "So Steve Willing *was* killed, was he?" bellowed the turnkey. "You admit it?"

"Well, it was like this, Dan," mumbled Purdy feebly; "you see——"

Rydal snatched him out of Purdy's grip and flung him back in his chair. "Yes or no?" he snapped.

Purdy licked his lips with his tongue, pulled his hand across his forehead, and again he nodded.

"It wasn't Bendigo Bart," roared Big Dan in his ear; "it was you!"

"Yes or no?" said the sheriff through his teeth.

There was a table just back of Purdy, and he twisted in his chair, laid his manacled hands on the table, and dropped his face in his arms. Mollie Randford,

her face pallid, her eyes staring, jumped to her feet.

"Fer Gawd's sake," she begged, "leave him be! Stop houndin' him! He never done it."

"Tell that to the marines," said the sheriff; "he admits it. Look at him! Dip a pen in the ink, Dan, and give it to Purdy."

The turnkey picked up a pen from the desk, dipped it, and the handcuffs rattled as he tucked it into Purdy's limp fingers.

"Now, Miss Randford," added the sheriff, "lay the paper in front of him, and he'll sign it."

The girl tore the quit-claim deed in two, then put the halves together and tore them again. The scraps she dropped into a wastebasket.

"I reckon there are enough buzzards peckin' at Gus without me takin' a hand!" she blazed. "Fer a couple of full-grown men, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Gus Purdy never killed Steve!"

"How do you know?" Rydal whirled on her like a fury. "That's the second time you've said that. I guess you know a good deal more about this than you've let on."

"You'll know just as much as I do," the girl answered, "if you'll look out of the window."

Both the sheriff and the turnkey stepped to the window. They stared, and it was plain that they were staggered. A cavalcade had halted in front of the jail building—a cavalcade consisting of four horses tandem, each on a rope lead; and the riders of the horses furnished the surprise.

For there was Steve Willing himself, dismounting from a star-faced roan; and Deputy James Bulldog Friday was dismounting from his buckskin at the other end of the procession. In between the two were a pair of prisoners, one wearing handcuffs and the other, a Mexican, with his hands lashed at his back.

Friday was important, and he ordered back a crowd of townspeople that was slowly gathering. It was evident that the deputy had thrown in with Willing, and that Willing had not had the heart to bring him in as a prisoner.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" gulped the sheriff. "That fellow with the bracelets is Sim Randford."

"Otherwise Bendigo Bart Gollifer," put in Mollie in a hard voice, "and don't you let him deny it. I'm sick and tired of all this shifty work, and here's where I quit."

Here was a bomb, exploding under the sheriff and the turnkey and almost lifting them off their feet. Sim Randford was Bendigo Bart? What possessed the girl to talk that way about her uncle?

"Flimflam," growled Big Dan; "she's puttin' something over."

"But that bay horse," faltered the sheriff; "the only time I ever came close enough to Bendigo Bart to see him he was riding a bay, just about like that one."

"If that's so," muttered Big Dan, "and if Friday has turned this trick, I can pretty near gamble on who'll be the next sheriff of this county. But it don't seem possible!"

"And it ain't possible!" snapped the sheriff with a scowl. "That false-alarm couldn't land on a horned toad if you'd give the toad an even break. It must have been Willing."

"Where's that girl?" asked Big Dan suddenly.

Rydal whirled and stared around the room. Mollie Randford had vanished, quietly and unobtrusively, after having had her say.

"We're going to need her, I expect," said the sheriff, "but we can find her later. Set out some more chairs, Dan; that outfit is coming in. I reckon we'll be getting the how of this pretty quick."

CHAPTER XX.

OUT OF THE GLOOM.

THE deputy, Friday, had to take a back seat. Willing had generously spared him the ignominy of appearing before his chief in the character of a law officer who had been betrayed into supporting the cause of a lawbreaker. Nothing was to be said—unless Randford said it—about the disgraceful part Friday had played in the capture at Tinaja Wells.

This was largely because Willing had a magnanimous soul and was not un-

mindful of human failings. There was no better man than Gus Purdy in all that desert country, yet he had his weak side; and there were probably any number of better men than Friday, long on talk and short on performance, but thoughts of Purdy's failings had inclined Willing to be lenient with Friday's.

A mile out of town Willing had halted his personally conducted party, restored to Friday his weapons—with all the ammunition removed from them—and had given him to understand that the recent past would be forgotten and never mentioned, provided Friday kept himself in the background so far as Randford was concerned.

This clemency completely won the deputy sheriff. He had learned his lesson, and it was Willing's hope that he would profit by it.

So it was Friday who ushered the party from Tinaja Wells into the sheriff's office; but it was Willing who presented Randford to that high legal official as Bendigo Bart Gollifer and, as Exhibit A, produced the bay horse, and as Exhibit B, placed the outlaw costume of Gollifer in evidence.

This did not happen, however, until Willing, moving to the table where Purdy still sat with his head in his arms, had laid a gentle hand on his pard's shoulder. Purdy had been deaf and blind to all that went on around him. The accusation that he had killed his pard had been the last straw. When he felt the hand on his shoulder, and lifted his drawn face, he nearly fell from his chair.

"It's all right, pard," said Willing; "everything's all right."

"Steve!" Purdy gasped, blinking. "That can't be you, can it, Steve?" He struggled up, gripping his pard's coat with his manacled hands, peering into his face with burning eyes.

"You've had a hard time, Gus," continued Willing, touched to the heart by all the plain evidence Purdy displayed of the ordeal he had passed through, "but that's past and gone. Sit there, Gus," he added, pushing Purdy back into his chair, "and get the whip hand of yourself."

"Eph was sayin' I'd killed you, Steve," mumbled Purdy.

Willing whirled on Rydal. "So you had a hand in bullyragging him, too!" he exclaimed. "Well, I wasn't killed; but when I think how Gus here has been tortured and hounded by people whom he thought were his friends, I feel like taking a gun and evening up the score for him.

"You men know what the desert does to people," Willing went on. "It can take a weakling and make a man of him; or it can reverse the process, take a man and make him a weakling. Honest men have been turned into rogues by the sun, the sand, and the solitude; and rogues, now and then, have been transformed into honest men.

"But suppose we consider Gus," continued Willing. "He was born of good stock, in an arroyo forty miles from nowhere. He never saw a settlement until he was ten; and when he saw one, he was disappointed and scuttled back into the desert again. Simplicity is the keynote of his character—a simplicity which is the sport of most men and the admiration of mighty few. You have to toil through the deserts side by side with Gus Purdy for a year or two before you discover that he has a heart of gold. I know what he is, and that's why we have been pards."

"Look here, Steve," put in Purdy eagerly; "I never thought you quit me cold, or that you took the horse and the poke of dust."

Willing pulled the buckskin bag from his sagging coat and dropped it onto Purdy's knees. "You might have thought that, Gus, with so many working on you," he said, "but if you had I'd never have charged it against you."

At this point Willing turned Randford and Enrique over to Rydal. "The twenty-five hundred reward money," he said, "comes to Purdy and me; that, with what's in the bag, will enable us to make a little bonanza of the diggings in Pima Cañon. We're going back there now, Gus and I, just as quick as we can shake the town dust from our feet. Take those handcuffs off him, Rydal; it's a wonder you didn't use a ball and chain, too. Desperate, wasn't he?" he jeered. "The law in this county certainly has some able exponents."

"You needn't rub it in," protested the sheriff, "just because you happened to have some luck in landing on Gollifer."

"How many times, Eph," inquired Willing, "have you halted at Tinaja Wells and chatted with Randford while you were out after Gollifer?"

"Who'd ever have suspected Randford of being Gollifer? I thought—everybody thought—Randford was too lazy to breathe."

"Everybody but me," qualified Willing; "I suspected him from the start. Now Gus and I are getting out of here. We're going to the Grand Central for supper, and we'll spend the night there. If you want a history of this case, come over to the hotel and get it. We'll want to borrow the bay for our return trip to the cañon to-morrow morning. Have him at the hotel by seven. Come on, Gus."

Willing hooked an arm through his pard's. Purdy was slowly recovering from the shock of Willing's appearance, and curiosity was the first emotion to break through his mental fog.

"How—how'd you ever do it, Steve?" he implored. "I can't make it seem possible, nohow. Crawlin' to the flat like you did, all shot to pieces; being put

away by that Mexican there, sort of premature as I allowed to him, and now showin' up here with Randford, and sayin' he's Gollifer. Sure there's no mistake?"

"We'll go over that after supper," Willing told him.

"And Geronimo, now; I reckon that bobcat's safe in the shack?"

"You're done with Geronimo, Gus, after that lucky piece has allowed all this to happen to you."

They had started arm in arm for the door. "Just a minute, pard," said Purdy. He walked over to Eph Rydal and snapped his fingers under his nose. "Killed him, didn't I? Oh, sure! But he's pretty lively for a dead man, ain't he? Yes or no!"

Purdy walked back to Willing and took his arm again. "Pards ain't like that; trouble with you hombres is, you don't know real, genuine pards when you see 'em. But after this you will—if you look at Steve and me. Adios!"

Thereupon, arm in arm, they walked out of the sheriff's office.

"Can you beat it?" asked Big Dan.

"Not in a thousand years!" declared Eph Rydal, with feeling.



A WRITING FAMILY

By James A. Sanaker

OUR family is writing things
To beat the band these days;
My sister's writing poetry
And lots of photo plays.

My brother's writing jazzy songs;
My mother talks on tots;
And I keep writing stories which
Don't seem to have no plots!

We all got writing fever now;
My aunt says we'll be wrecks;
But pa says everything's all right
As long as he writes checks.

Catboats and Catastrophes~



By Frederick Walworth Brown~

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

TWIN WILD CATS.

THE yellow roadster whirled up the curving driveway of the club, the spurting gravel rattling on the fenders like hail on a sheet-iron shack, and came to an abrupt halt before the main door. A tall yellow-haired youth eased himself from behind the wheel and, ignoring the staring "No Parking" sign, stalked into the lobby with long, loose-jointed strides.

The Charter Member straightened up in his accustomed seat, adjusted his glasses, verified his diagnosis in a squinting scrutiny of the new arrival, and settled back at attention. Standing straddle legged in the center of the room the tall young man lighted a cigarette, exhaled a blue cloud from his lungs, and challenged the company.

"Anybody seen that low-bred brother of mine?"

No one answered, but the door of the billiard room swung back, and a thick-set, dark young man entered and walked catlike toward the tall youth.

The Charter Member leaned over the arm of his chair. "The Bell twins," he said to the Latest Member, as though imparting information of value.

"Twins!" exclaimed the Latest Member. "How come?"

"Twins—yes. Terry takes after his mother, and Perry's the old man resurrected. Half a million between 'em—in trust. They love each other the way twins should and fight like strange wild cats. Like to watch 'em. They's a sketch."

The tall youth glared at the short one, and the latter scowled back, his heavy black brows meeting above his nose.

"Nice way to keep an appointment," the taller said. "Leave me hanging around here waiting for you."

"Vacate," said the short one. "I heard you come in."

"Oh, all right then, me angel boy!" Wrapping his arm about his brother's neck, the lanky youth turned toward the door.

The short arm of Perry looped itself around the giant's waist, and they passed outside. A moment later the roar of the roadster announced their departure.

"A sketch," repeated the Charter Member. "Old Bell used to say if they'd been born in a hospital he'd have thought the nurses had put something over on him. Fought each other from the cradle up, according to old Bell, but if he started to chastise one he had to lick 'em both."

"I've heard yarns about them."

"And they're probably true. The man doesn't live who could invent the line those two pull off. They hunt in couples,

but to see 'em together you'd never think it. I'll bet a pint they're hatching some deviltry right now against the peace and quiet of the club.

"They had a little run-in with the commodore last week," he went on, and tomorrow's the fall regatta. Henderson has about as much tact as a five-ton truck, and he managed to tread on their toes. I'm free to say I don't want 'em on my trail. They've got brains and money and a perverted sense of humor. They don't stop at anything.

"Ever hear about the Abyssinian cow?" he continued. "Last summer they dyed a white cow with pokeberry juice and entered her at the county fair as a newly imported variety. Got away with it, too! Took first prize for Abyssinian Purple Cows. Claimed they were going to breed her to a Holstein bull and develop a brand-new line of black-and-blue cattle.

"You can't imagine how exotic a little purple dye can make a scrub cow look! The facts leaked out when the New York papers got hold of it, and the Department of Agriculture sent a man from Washington to find out just how the Bell twins had succeeded in importing the cow without quarantine inspection.

"That all happened because two years ago the fair association ran them out of the grounds for turning loose two dozen toy balloons on the track as the last heat of the 2:17 pace was turning into the stretch. They had to settle for seven dished sulky wheels and some lacerated feelings, but what did they care? It made the most amazing panjandrum you can imagine for a minute or two."

"What are they down on the commodore for?" asked the Latest Member. "I'm racing the *Snark* for the cup tomorrow. I figure it's the commodore I have to beat."

"I didn't hear it, you understand, but I'm told that last Saturday night Terry was dancing with Miss Dale and they began putting on some fancy steps. Presently the other couples drew out, and they went on to give an exhibition that professionals might have envied. Anyway, Henderson got shocked and ordered the music stopped and made some side

remark about girls with more legs than brains.

"Some kind friend," the Charter Member went on, "of course informed Terry and he cornered the commodore and gave him the choice of denying it or taking a 'biff on the beak,' as my informant put it. Henderson squeezed out of it in some way and saved his nose, but it's my opinion he might better have let the boy hit him and get it out of his system.

"Then Billings, who's on the house committee because he's such an officious little pup, takes Terry one side and asks him to absent himself for the rest of the evening, 'for the good of the club,' and Terry collected his brother and they went off together as usual. If they'd stayed away, 'sulking in their tent,' so to speak, I'd feel better about to-morrow. But they haven't. They've been around the club all week, acting quite as usual, and I'll bet something pretty they're hatching a surprise for Henderson and Billings and the club in general."

CHAPTER II.

UP TO A TRICK.

IN the meanwhile, the yellow roadster was taking the kinks in the Ram's Horn Road at a pace which had practically no relation to the laws of the State or of common sense.

"Get 'em?" asked Perry, as they shot into a straight stretch along the upper river.

"I did so," answered Terry. "Eight pounders. Fat ones. Went to Tom's River for 'em. They'll never track us to that lair. Six of 'em and six dog chains."

"There'll be a riot. I can hear the high-minded commodore spill cuss words now."

"And the regatta committee! Solemn buzzards."

With a chuckle Terry thrust out his left hand, and with his right swung the car, without slackening speed, across the road and between the granite posts which marked the entrance to the ancestral Bell estate. In the garage the brothers dismissed the chauffeur, who appeared to take over the car, and themselves

opened the compartment in the rear and extracted, one by one, six large, shiny flatirons.

"Think they'll hold 'em?" asked Perry doubtfully, as he hefted the laundry implements.

"Hold 'em! No; they won't hold 'em, but they'll make 'em what you might call sluggish, me boy."

"They seem small for the job."

"Small, but powerful. One of these will add about fifteen minutes to the commodore's mile, and that's what I call being sluggish. The old boy will think his tub has grown a weedy bottom overnight."

They returned the flatirons to the car and, locking the compartment, went up to the house in close consultation.

That evening they spent ostentatiously at the club. They were seen to arrive in Perry's plum-colored roadster, a duplicate of Terry's save in color, and were much in evidence for some three hours. They indulged in a heated interchange in the billiard room, Terry accusing his brother of jarring his elbow at the climax of a difficult massé shot.

"If you weren't built like a traveling crane a person could be in the same room with you and not joggle you," retorted Perry.

"Descending to personalities, are you?" asked Terry nastily. "Last resort of the defeated. In fact an acknowledgment of guilt. Why don't you act like a grown man and apologize?"

"Bah, you poor sardine!" Perry came back. "Always yelping about something."

He chalked his cue, shot, and missed. Terry openly exulted. They finished the game in silence, banged the cues into the rack, and departed different ways.

"Slight feud in the Bell family," remarked a player, at the next table.

Later they met on the veranda where certain of the weatherwise in their own conceit were predicting the climatic conditions for the regatta on the morrow.

"Mark my words," said Henderson, the commodore, "we'll sail reefed down to-morrow. It's coming in now from the northeast, and by noon to-morrow it will be blowing."

"You may be right," said Colter, the

vice. "But my guess is that it will swing around before morning and clear up with light airs from the northwest."

The commodore laughed, rather too noisily. "Not a chance, my dear fellow. Case of hope fathering thought. The *Wing-a-wing* likes light airs, of course."

The speakers became aware of furious whispers.

"Well, I'll just bet you a ten-spot the commodore takes the cup. I suppose you think that bathtub of yours is going to show the way." Terry's face was thrust down insolently toward his brother's.

"You're on," said Perry coolly. "Anybody's a fool to back one boat against the fleet."

"I am, am I? I happen to have seen the *Elsa* in a blow. How about it, commodore?"

"Everybody knows she's a heavy-weather boat," said Henderson coldly.

"I'll tell the cock-eyed universe she is!" chortled Terry, and Henderson registered disgust, though with caution.

"If you're so bullhead certain about it, why stop at a ten spot?" asked Perry calmly. "Cold feet, as usual?"

"Why, you poor little insignificant hop toad!" raved Terry. "If you were man size I'd crack you one for that. But I can't hit a dwarf."

"Well, put up or shut up."

"I'm not risking more with you," said Terry. "I'll have a gay time collecting that, I reckon." He turned on his heel and made off.

"Little worse than usual," commented Colter, as Perry followed his brother.

"If that's the way they feel, I guess we're safe," said Billings, the chairman of the regatta committee. "I've been a little fearful of what that precious pair might be planning for to-morrow."

"Young roughnecks," muttered Henderson. "Really ought not to enjoy the privileges of the club."

"They're both entered for to-morrow, aren't they?" asked Colter.

"Yes; but you know neither one of them knows how to handle a boat. Perry's *Jabberwock* could be made to show something with the right man at her tiller. But she'll never win a race with him steering."

Walloping round the Ram's Horn curves with Perry's toe resting solidly on her accelerator, the plum-colored roadster bore the brothers homeward. Later, it was remembered that no one saw them go. "Guess we dusted their eyes all right!" Perry chuckled. "But that was a nasty crack about the dwarf."

"How about your 'traveling crane' and the 'cold feet?' And by the way, old dear, that bet is off. That old glass-eyed polyp knows about as much about catboat sailing as I do about differential calculus. And besides——"

"All right. How about backing the *Yum-Yum*? I'll bet you ten you'll be looking at the *Jabberwock's* stern at the finish."

"You made a bet, me boy. Might as well hand over the ten here and now."

The yellow car was missing when they rolled into the garage.

"'Bout time that gilded shover was turning in, don't you think?" asked Terry. "I told him he could run over to the village, but I didn't expect him to spend the night."

"Thunder!" exclaimed Perry. "He's got the flatirons."

"Not so," Terry said. "I took 'em out before dinner. Let's get 'em ready."

He opened a locker in the corner, disclosing the ironmongery. Also there were six heavy, extra-length, steel dog chains, equipped with patent snaps.

"If we tie the crossbar end to the flat-iron handle, we can use the snap to make her fast to one of the rudder bolts in the sternpost," said Perry.

"Sounds good," agreed Terry. "Sounds extra special good! Only the rudder pins fill those eyebolts so full we'll never get the snap in, too."

"If we can't we can pass the end around the pin itself and snap it fast to the chain below."

"Right we can, and with that much chain, me son, they'll be dredging bottom more than half the time! I freely predict that the *Elsa* and the *Polly* and the *Wing-a-Wing* will act some sluggish."

"If they drag bottom, they'll get on to it. They ought to be swinging free most of the time, just tickling the gravel now and then for luck, and picking up

all the weed between the club wharf and the island. I guess about four feet ought to do it."

"Sounds logical," remarked Terry.

They tied one dog chain to each flat-iron handle, leaving approximately the desired four feet of chain with the snap on the loose end. This done, they stored the whole assortment in the rear of the plum-colored car, switched off the garage lights, and retired to the house and to bed.

CHAPTER III.

REALLY ASTONISHING.

AT one thirty in the morning, clad only in bathing suits and overcoats, stumbling with sleep but nonetheless moving with resolution, the Bell twins sought the garage.

"Snakes!" growled Terry. "That night owl hasn't come with my car yet. Hope he hasn't ditched her."

They climbed into the plum-colored machine and presently were tearing down the river road with Perry driving. A quarter of a mile from the club, they turned at right angles into a private driveway. With lights off, Perry guided the car off the gravel, and she rolled to a stop on grass. Laden with three flatirons apiece, the two young men presently skirted the club grounds and reached the river.

At three, as dawn tinged the east, a canoe grated on the shingle and presently was drawn up and turned over. Thirty minutes later the two were back in the garage. The yellow car was still missing.

They slept late and did not arrive at the club next day till noon, much to the relief of the committee. Since ten o'clock, the varied events of regatta day had been running after the jerky manner of amateur affairs generally. Punting contests, canoe races for men, women, and mixed couples, and a tub race had followed one another with tiresome waits between and much hurrying about and megaphoning by Billings. The main event of the day, the Ashley Cup Race for catboats, was due to start at one.

The commodore had missed his guess. Out of the west the wind came evenly, the sun shone, and conditions approached

the ideal. At their buoys the eight competing boats swung with the tide, their crews pottering about cockpits and decks, shifting ballast and coiling ropes, nervously killing time till they could hoist sails and begin jockeying for the start.

At twelve thirty the committee boat put off and took station beyond the flag buoy to mark the starting line. Immediately the great high-peaked racing sails began going up on the eight contenders, and one after another they slipped their moorings and moved over toward the starting line, clean hulls flashing in the sunlight and towering canvas bellying to the wind.

Two of the eight moved swiftly, swooping down like hawks upon the squat committee boat, only to turn at the last moment and tear away, their captains watching the little wrinkles at the throats of their sails as they edged to windward.

Clean-cut, dashing craft were these two, dividing the water with deceptive smoothness, turning as nimbly as a dancer, shooting down before the wind, reaching away like race horses, or nosing up into the very eye of the breeze. The names on their gleaming sterns were *Jabberwock* and *Yum-Yum*, and Perry in spotless flannels leaned on the tiller of the first, and Terry in equally impeccable flannels guided the second.

The six others! Sluggish was right. Henderson's *Elsa* and Billings' *Polly* and Colter's *Wing-a-Wing* and the *Mudlark* and the *Fishhawk* and the *Snark* moved, but they moved without snap. They seemed to have eaten too heartily. With wrinkled brows their captains could be seen studying sails and rigging, ordering ballast shifted, directing the lifting of centerboards, falsely suspected of scraping bottom—in short, moving the yachtsman's heaven and earth to discover the astonishing and utterly disconcerting want of vivacity in their respective crafts.

Sluggishly they bore down on the line, sluggishly they answered their helms and swung up into the wind, and sluggishly they turned as the five-minute signal cracked from the committee boat. Farthest from the line, the *Jabberwock*, running off like a migrating duck, held her course till three of the important minutes had passed. Then Perry put her

about and headed straight for the line, on a broad reach that would take her over straightened out for the first mark.

Meanwhile Terry had chosen to throw the *Yum-Yum* nose to the wind to drift down slowly toward the line. When but thirty seconds of the last minute remained, he brought her round and, gathering way as her great sail took the breeze, she, too, reached for the line.

Through the drugged fleet of their competitors the two passed as meteors seem to pass the fixed stars of the heavens. As the starting gun boomed, they shot between the committee boat and the flag buoy, and no man could say which leaping bow passed first. Behind them, fighting the drowsiness produced by eight-pound flatirons chained to their rudder bolts, came the fleet.

The Charter Member, sitting on the club veranda with field glasses working, described it as the worst start for the Ashley Cup in the history of that celebrated competition. With difficulty could he credit the evidence collected by his own two eyes. He polished his field glasses and looked again. "Incredible! The Bell twins showing the way! In my day——"

At that point his audience fled.

Through the crowd on the veranda, the lawn, and the pier, the amazing news ran, and interest in the race instantly doubled and trebled.

"Mark my words," cried the Charter Member, pursuing his audience across the lawn, "mark my words, there is some shenanigan about it! Those young rascals are at the bottom of it."

"They're out in front of it, at any rate," said Mrs. Marble, the Prettiest Member, with a laugh.

"And getting farther out in front every minute," remarked her companion, Miss Dale. "I wish I could see the commodore's face about now."

The first leg was a broad reach to a flag under the bluff opposite the island. For some reason, not discoverable even by expert boat builders, the *Jabberwock* was a better boat on a reach than the *Yum-Yum*, though they had been built by the same man from the same model and were as nearly identical as rule and

line could make them. Slowly the *Jabberwock* drew away till open water showed between the two, while far astern and steadily dropping farther the hamstrung six, in a straggling bunch, labored heavily up the river.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT A RACE!

THE *Jabberwock* came down on the mark like a swooping hawk. As Perry swung her round, the sheet ran out with a squeak of blocks and away she shot on the second leg, dead before the wind. Fourteen seconds behind her the *Yum-Yum* cleared the flag and, running free, she immediately began to pick up the distance which she had lost on the reach.

Slowly she drew up on the leader, till, maneuvering cleverly, Terry shut off the wind from his only rival, blanketed her, slipped past, and took the lead, while Perry danced madly in his cockpit, shaking his fist as the *Yum-Yum* passed him and shouting bitter words across the waters.

Scarcely any in the crowd at the clubhouse noticed the fact when, some minutes later, the *Elsa* lumbered up to the mark, blundered around it in some fashion, and blowed away in the wake of the vanishing leaders. The *Snark* followed her, moving with a leisurely air as though not greatly interested in the old race, anyway, but willing to go the route like a good sport.

She rounded the mark, her boom swung out as she straightened for the run down the wind, and then she stopped. She did not slacken her pace decorously, as a self-respecting boat should. She stopped—just like that!

It must have been a good dog chain that Terry had purchased and it must have been honest workmanship which forged the rudder bolts of the *Snark* and affixed them to her hull. Her flatiron incubus had fouled something and fouled it to stay.

Her stern sank, and the waters foamed to the rear combing of the cockpit. Then, to the sound of ripping deck planking, the step of her mast snapped off, and over her rearing bow went the whole

towering fabric of her rigging. In an instant she passed from a smart and well-found racing yacht to a complete and dismal wreck. In turn the four others came up, swung clear, shouted their commiserations, and passed on.

Meanwhile the ramping leaders neared the second flag, the *Yum-Yum* well in the van and still going away. As she rounded the stake the sheet was trimmed smartly in, the crew piled out on the rail, the boom swung over with a clank of the sheet block. Heeling gracefully she sped away on the port tack, for the beat to windward which ought, with her present lead, to win her the cup. Immediately, however, it was apparent that something was wrong and most radically wrong.

"Get that centerboard down!" yelled Terry. "We're drifting to loo'ard like a loose blimp."

"It is down," answered the member of the crew whose job it was to attend to this matter. "I shoved her down as we came about."

"Well, jam her down again. We'll be aground in another minute," raved Terry.

Obediently the youth addressed thrust his stick into the well, thrust it to the limit, and touched nothing more solid than the water of the river.

"It's gone!" he cried. "The board's gone. It's fell out of her." After a squinting glance astern he went on: "Yonder she is! The pin's busted and let her loose."

Floating jauntily in their wake lay the broad red board, which, vertically suspended beneath them, should have blocked their crablike progress toward the shingle of the eastern shore.

A centerboard yacht without a centerboard is as incapable of beating to windward as an angletail is of beating an egg. As the *Jabberwock* came tearing up and rounded the flag, the *Yum-Yum* took ground solidly broadside to and passed out of the picture, to the jeering shouts of Perry and the bloodcurdling replies of his stranded brother.

Naught now stood between the leaping *Jabberwock* and victory but three, or at most four, tacks into the wind. Bravely

she bore away on the first of these, and Terry, philosophically filling his pipe as his crew got the *Yum-Yum's* sail down, watched her draw away with a curious intentness in his gaze.

Heeling to the puffs and throwing spray over the deck and cockpit, the *Jabberwock* tore down the river, leaving a foaming wake behind. The *Elsa*, her nearest competitor, plowing across the river like a brick-laden barge, was still some distance from the second flag, when Perry gave the shout, "Hard alee!" and flung over the tiller.

As the *Jabberwock* came up to the wind and her boom swung over, Terry, who was watching, removed his pipe and leaned forward eagerly. Then, with a yell, he flung his cap on the cockpit grating and then danced upon it in fiendish joy.

"Oh, boy! Did it work? I'll tell the squint-eyed planet it did. He will doctor my centerboard, will he? Look at him! Oh, look at him!" He collapsed over the combing and lay flapping his arms feebly.

As the *Jabberwock* had filled away on the starboard tack, her peak halyards had parted and her towering sail had collapsed. To save the canvas from being cut to ribbons by the thrashing gaff, Perry slashed the throat halyards and down came the whole mass on the forward deck, leaving her as helpless as a drifting log.

"Terrible!" cried the Charter Member. "Never heard of such a thing. Three of them wrecked. They don't build boats nowadays as they did in my day. Why it's no more than a full breeze, and three of them wrecked! Terrible! Terrible!" He wrung his hands helplessly.

CHAPTER V.

END OF A WONDERFUL DAY.

IN due time the *Elsa*, dragging her flatiron all around the river and trailing as complete a collection of salt-water flora as an enthusiastic botanist could have gathered in a week, rounded the second flag, took four laborious tacks, and crossed the line to the tooting of sirens and the applause of the crowd.

Her time indicated that she had sailed most of the afternoon in a dead calm, but what of that?

As Henderson put it afterward: "My time may be awful, but the rest are worse."

Motors were out towing in the wrecks, and everything was merry as the well-known marriage bell, when up the pier strode the captain of the *Snark*, calling piteously for justice and the regatta committee and swinging at arm's length an eight-pound flatiron on the end of a steel dog chain. Five other captains listened to his almost incoherent epic and silently sought their own boats, where suspicion swiftly hardened into certainty.

Later the six, with six identical flatirons on the ends of six identical dog chains, appeared before the committee and unanimously accused the Bell twins of everything from piracy on the high seas to mayhem with intent to murder. Five of them demanded that the race be called off and be sailed again on a later date, only Henderson vehemently contending that as they had all sailed under the same handicap the result should stand.

After the twins had drawn the raving captain of the *Snark* apart and calmed him enough to listen to their offer to restore his boat to its state of pristine perfection, and the regatta committee had discussed the expulsion of the twins and ended by deciding to treat the matter as a joke, the edict went forth that the race would be sailed again on the following Saturday, despite Henderson's wrathful threat that the *Elsa* would be withdrawn. Not until all this had transpired did the twins have a chance to retire and confront one another.

"When did you monkey with my centerboard?" demanded Terry.

"When did you cut a strand in my halyards?" countered Perry.

Terry burst into joyous laughter. "Boy," he cried, "I thought I hadn't cut her deep enough! It looked as though the dadburned manila was going to hold till you crossed the finish."

"Well I thought the pine stick I put in in place of your centerboard bolt was going to stand up, too. Say, that was a

job. I put in the hardest two hours I ever worked while you were off getting the flatirons."

"Traitor!" cried Terry. "I went back last night and doctored your halyards. That's why my car was out. I left it parked in a dark spot down by the gate."

They fell on each other's neck to stifle their shouts.

"Some day!" said Perry, at last.

"I'll tell the pop-eyed solar system," agreed Terry.

How did you like this story? Will you write us a short letter giving us your opinion of it? At the same time we should be glad to have any criticisms that you care to offer on any other story in this number, or on the magazine as a whole. Any letter that you may send will be appreciated by the editors.



HOMeward BOUND

By Pat. B. Costello

FLOATIN' past de levees ob de dea' ol' Mississipp',
 On ma way to N' O'leans, aboa'd a lazy ship;
 All ma hea't is cravin' am dat Loosiana sho';
 Ah'm back home now, brotkeh, an' ah'll roam aroun' no mo.

When a kid, ah sat with mammy by de cabin side;
 Tol' her den ah craved to take a railroad train an' ride
 All aroun' to see de folks ob othe' fa'-off lan's;
 Sail aboa'd a full-rigged ship, aboun' fo' fo'eign stran's.

Mammy took ma han' beneath dat ol' plantation moon;
 Said she kinder knew she'd lose her coal-black baby soon;
 Said, "Ma honey chile, no matte' where yo' choose to roam,
 Yo'll be lonesome all de time fo' N'O'leans, an' home."

Said good-by, one mo'nin', lef' he' stan'in' by de gate,
 Ah felt dog-gone lonesome, an' inclined to hesitate;
 But de open trail a-windin', an' ol' bobwhite's call,
 An' de painted skies awakin', seemed de bes' ob all.

Seen de worl' from Frisco, clean aroun' to Timbuktu;
 Seen de folks ah dreamed about, an still ah'm feelin' blue;
 Searched fo' ol' contentment ev'y po't an' trail o' God,
 And it's lef' me yearnin' jes' to tread ol' Dixie's sod.

Heah dat banjo music comin' from dat levee sho',
 Soun's like some ol' ca'eless angel opened Heaven's do';
 See de settin' sun a-paintin' dem ol' ha'bo' scenes;
 Oh, Pa'adise is jes' ma mammy—an' ol' N'O'leans!



Fiddler's Luck

By
William Merriam Rouse



WHEN "Southpaw Jim" Jones fiddled his way to Bildad Road and saw Nell Macdougall, a silent voice within told him that it was time to get married and settle down. Southpaw knew the good things of life at first sight, and in the case of Nell Macdougall he had made no mistake. She was a woman of godly stature, straight and deep-chested and molded close to perfection.

She was just the kind who would make a good nurse when a man got along in years and began to have rheumatism. Moreover, she owned a pair of sparkling blue eyes set under a broad, white forehead; and little chestnut curls escaped to hang caressingly against that forehead.

Southpaw had wanted to marry her at sight, but after he had stowed his long legs under her table and eaten half of one of her apple pies, she became a religion to him. A first husband had died and left Nell provided with as good a home as any second husband could ask for, and Southpaw resolved to fiddle his way into that home if it took all summer and a new set of fiddlestrings to do it. With a wife such as she was, no tramp fiddler would need worry about his future.

It had not taken Southpaw any time at all to get acquainted, for on Bildad Road a man with a fiddle was as welcome as the hard-cider season. All he had done was to knock at the back door of her house and ask plaintively for a drink of

water, with his fiddle case hugged under one arm.

He got milk and an invitation to stay to dinner. Having already found a family willing to give him a room as long as he would play at least once a day, Southpaw Jones was all set for what he intended to make one of the most successful courtships in the history of the Adirondack Mountains.

Southpaw had called three times on the Widow Macdougall, and he had made a distinct impression. Not only was Jones a born fiddler, but he had the hungry and bereft air of a hound dog, and pity was stirring within her breast for this wandering minstrel. He was a tall and comely man, neat, and with the distinction of a streak of gray in his forelock.

Women between sixteen and seventy usually looked upon Southpaw with a tolerant and kindly eye, and he would have bet a hundred to one that he was going to marry Nell Macdougall before the apple blossoms, now in bloom, faded.

Southpaw would have made that bet when he started out to make his fourth call, but he was to change his mind before ever his feet stepped again upon her vine-covered porch. He was upon a pleasant stretch of road almost within sight of her house and meditating pleasantly upon what she might be going to have for the noonday dinner, when a shadow fell across his spirit. There are a few rare persons whose presence is like a damp cellar. Jones looked up from

his reverie and saw one of these standing in front of him.

This man's jaw alone was enough to convict him of a minor crime. It was blue-black with whiskers, and it stuck out under his ears as well as forward toward the beholder. His grimy suspenders accentuated a pair of shoulders which looked capable of lifting a loaded hay-rack; the sleeves of his shirt were filled to the full extent of the cloth allowed by the manufacturers. If ever a man was built for carnage, this one was; and if the look in his small, glassy eyes meant anything, he was about ready to begin.

"Huh!" he snorted. His paws curled up into fists and rested upon his hips. "So you're the tramp fiddler! Well, I'm Gurk Varney!"

Southpaw grinned uncertainly. He was by no means a coward, but he had no more use for fighting than a cat has for water; the troubadour strain in him was too strong. Moreover, if he and this blue-jawed blot on the face of nature came to blows it would not be a fight; it would be a slaughter.

"How d'ye do, Varney!" Jones said cheerfully. "Nice day!"

"You can't palaver me!" Varney jerked a monstrous thumb over his shoulder. "Going up to the Widder Macdougals, ain't you?"

"Well," replied Southpaw cautiously, "I thought some of going there this morning, but maybe I won't."

"You better not!" Gurk Varney took a step nearer and thrust his head forward. "I aim to marry the Widder Macdougals myself!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Jones faintly.

"You got your warning," growled Varney. "I live right over the other side of the knoll from her house, and I can keep track of what's going on! And remember this! When I lick a man, I don't jest give him a plain licking! I bust his bones!"

Gurk Varney turned away and vaulted the rail fence. Half a minute more and he had vanished in the woods.

Southpaw stood motionless, with his gaze fixed upon the spot where that gigantic figure had disappeared. He rubbed his eyes, almost persuaded that he had been dreaming. "Gosh!" he muttered.

II.

THE soul of Southpaw Jones was troubled, but not entirely dismayed. He went the way he had intended to go, but he was far from regardless of the threat that had been made against his peace and dignity. He would be careful, but if he could not wriggle out of this difficulty with a whole skin, it would be the first time he had ever failed. Nell Macdougals was worth the risk.

She was sewing carpet rags on her comfortable porch when he arrived; and the odor of a wonderful dinner floated out from the kitchen. Southpaw lifted his nose and sniffed, and a feeling of great contentment stole over him. A life like this was the life for him! He looked down at the curls clustering against the creamy neck of Nell Macdougals and breathed a sigh of happiness.

"You sit down and play me that two-step you played last night," she said with a smile. "My goodness, I don't know when I've enjoyed music as I do this spring!"

"Um!" agreed Southpaw. He paused in his tuning up to sniff again. "Veal, I bet!"

"Veal potpie with dumplings and old-fashioned rice pudding with lots of raisins and hard sauce!" She nodded. "It beats me that a man so full of music should have room for four square meals a day!"

"It takes good grub to make music just the way it does to make—pork, like this feller Varney!"

Southpaw looked up quickly and saw a swift darkening of Nell Macdougals's face. He had hoped to draw something. She turned and stared at him.

"Gurk Varney been bothering you?" she asked quickly. "It's going to come to the point where I'll have to put a charge of buckshot into that man! Then like enough I'll have to go to court just when I want to put up preserves, or something!"

If she would do just that, what a lot of trouble it might save! Jones brightened, both at the thought of buckshot in the system of Gurk Varney and the realization that he was not a rival dangerous in the ordinary sense.

"Shucks!" he replied carelessly. "He

said he aimed to marry you, but I just let him talk! I knew a handsome woman like you wouldn't marry him!"

"You mean that a sensible woman like me wouldn't marry a man that didn't amount to something," said Nell Macdougall. "I guess that's what you mean. Well, anyway, Gurk has been pestering me for over a year now. He's drove away most of the boys that used to come here. I wouldn't give much for a man that could be scared away from going where he wanted to! Would you, Jim?"

"No, sir!" Southpaw straightened up indignantly, but his heart was leaden.

"It was probably on account of your fiddle that he didn't fight you right off," she went on. "He's crazy about music, but that won't stop him when he gets mad enough."

"They wasn't anything musical about him to-day!"

"No; I s'pose not!" Nell laughed. "But he's got an accordion that he tries to play on moonlight nights."

"I hope I never see him again," said Southpaw fervently, as he settled his fiddle under his chin, "but of course I don't intend to let him nor anybody else scare me!"

Southpaw Jones played for his dinner and earned it. After he had put away such a meal as renewed his faith in life, he rose from the table briskly and took off his coat, deaf to the soothing call of an armchair and tobacco.

"I'll fill up the wood box for you," he said. He had to make himself solid enough to counteract possible disaster at the hands of Varney. "And I might as well do any other chores you got to do."

There was a twinkle in the eye of Nell Macdougall as she considered his solemn rolling up of sleeves. "All right, Jim. You fill the wood box and split some kindling and pump a couple of pails of water. And when you get that done, I wish you'd see if you can fix the trapdoor that goes down cellar. The cleat it drops against has rotted, and it won't hold a person's weight. I had to drag a chest of drawers across it so I wouldn't forget and step on it."

Southpaw had drawn a little more than he expected, but he went at the work valiantly and finished everything but the

trapdoor leading to the cellar stairs. Lifting the door, he found an inadequate cleat that had grown punky with the years until it was no more than sufficient to hold the weight of the door alone. Nell had felt it yield under her feet and so discovered the danger.

Southpaw saw that if she stepped upon the door now, the hinges would rip out and she would be plunged into the cellar. However, he needed a piece of two-by-four and some tenpenny spikes for that job, and he promised to bring them the next day.

III.

DINNER had been a little late on account of the fiddle, and by the time the work was done the afternoon was more than half spent. Nell Macdougall and Southpaw went out to the quiet, vine-covered porch again to rest in the soothing embrace of rocking-chairs while the sun sank toward the horizon.

The fragrance of the blossoms in the Widow Macdougall's orchard filled the nostrils of Jim Jones. The chicken which he suspected was going to be fried for supper hung picked, plump, and yellow at the woodshed door.

What a haven for a man! Southpaw, holding a candle on the cellar stairs to inspect the trapdoor, had glimpsed rows of jars filled with preserves, seen hams and fat strips of bacon hanging from the rafters. Unless his diagnosis was all wrong there was a barrel of cider down there, and the long row of bottles he had seen could contain nothing but home-made wine.

He looked across the porch at Nell Macdougall, gently rocking and humming a song as she sewed. She had a clear-cut profile and a shapely, capable hand. He had intended to wait a week before proposing, but he suddenly decided to do it in the gloaming of this very afternoon. Gurk Varney was too much of a reality. Southpaw wanted to get things settled before anything happened.

The sun went down into its nest of mountains in a reckless blaze of pink and gold, mauve and crimson. By force of will, Southpaw kept his itching fingers from his fiddle. Not yet was the time for music. Another day he could serenade

the sun's descent from the comfort of that porch; on this day he was waiting for Nell Macdougall to grow wistful and hungry for music. At exactly the right hour he would feed her such music as she had never heard from his fiddlestrings before. If he persuaded her to marry him on this short acquaintance, his fiddle would have to do most of the work.

Sure enough, it was fried chicken for supper. Nothing would produce better music for Southpaw Jim Jones than fried chicken and cream cake, and these two delicacies were fed to him at the supper table of Nell Macdougall until he could hold no more. Like every superlative cook, she appreciated the silent compliment of appetite.

"Set the dishes in the pantry, Nell," said Southpaw huskily, "and never mind washing 'em now. This don't seem like a time to wash dishes. I got some music in my system that's got to come out or my soul will swell up and bust!"

She allowed him to take her hand as he led her to the porch, and Southpaw thrilled to the touch. He suspected that he was falling in love with something more than this woman's home. He had heard that all left-handed fiddlers and baseball pitchers were crazy, and for the first time in his life he believed it.

Else why should he feel such sudden bashfulness about marrying all this and bringing nothing to the home of the bride but a fiddle and a canvas grip of clean shirts? This was not worthy of a man who had fiddled his way around all forms of manual labor.

The gloaming was upon that pleasant cottage; there was just enough movement in the air to bring the scent of the apple blossoms drifting across the porch. Southpaw sighed, opened his fiddle case, and wound his legs around the rocking chair. He rosined his bow carefully, waved it in salute to the first dim star, and began a stately minuet.

It was the right beginning, he felt. Next he played a quadrille, and from that he went to the tunes to which the fathers and grandfathers of the present Bildad Roaders had danced. He played "Money Musk" and "The Portland Fancy" and "The Double Scotch Reel." A glance told him that her head was swaying and

her slim foot tapping in time to the music. He had her going.

Now was the time to shift to hymn tunes; and after he had got her into a state of sentiment where she could overlook his sins, he knew what to do. He played "Just As I Am, Without One Plea" and let the last notes rest upon the air for a moment. Then Southpaw gathered himself for the great effort before he risked his fate.

Oh, believe me, if all those endearing young charms—

He finished playing. The moon was just coming up over the shoulder of a mountain. Southpaw felt sorry for the whole world, including himself. A tear ran down his cheek. He saw that Nell was leaning toward him over the arm of her chair, with her hands clasped. Now was the moment. He laid his fiddle softly in its case and moved his chair over toward hers.

Then it was that a blight came upon him, as withering as the first frost of autumn. A low-throated growl made Southpaw turn his head around, and he saw, a dozen feet away, a rectangular human mass which every shuddering fiber of his being told him was Gurk Varney.

Nell drew back, suddenly upright in her chair. Varney stepped over the railing and stood looking silently down upon Southpaw Jones. It would not have been necessary for the visitor to speak what was in his mind; mayhem and manslaughter radiated from him.

"Good evening," said the Widow Macdougall in a chilly voice. "I guess we'd better go into the house and light the lamps."

Southpaw picked up his fiddle and edged into the kitchen, with Varney coming after him upon feet which shook the framework of that small building.

IV.

IN the soft yellow glow of the lamps, Gurk Varney glared and breathed hard through his nose. "I thought I told you to keep away from here!" he rumbled.

"Gurk!" cried Nell Macdougall sharply. "What right have you got to tell people they can't come here?"

Varney turned with a slight lurch, and then Southpaw knew that he had been helping himself freely to bootleg or some of the potent cider of the autumn before. Not that it mattered. Varney was just as formidable now as ever.

"I don't bother none about rights!" replied Gurk with a wide grin. "This is the fiddler's last chance! I'm going to camp here this evening. And if he don't go now, when he does go they won't be enough left of him to grease a pancake griddle! I'm going to chaw 'im up!"

To Southpaw Jim Jones, it became clear that this was another one of the tight places into which he was always getting himself; and as always there was a reasonably good chance to wriggle out. He could still go and be safe. He looked into the eyes of Nell Macdougall, and he knew that she was wondering what he would do.

Common sense told him to take his fiddle and go with a laugh, as he had gone from many another troublesome place. There were many other women who would listen and look with favor upon him and his fiddle.

There was something in the deep gaze of Nell Macdougall that stayed him; in her eyes was the same thing that he sometimes found in his fiddlestrings. One was color and the other was sound, but they were the same. He never had been able to do less than his best when the fiddle talked in a certain way. He had forgotten about the cider and the hams down cellar, but he knew that Nell would never think the same of the memory of him if he went now.

Southpaw turned and snapped his fingers not more than two feet from the nose of Gurk Varney. "I'll go when Nell Macdougall wants me to," he said, "and not any before!"

"Good for you, Jim Jones!" she cried. "To-morrow I'll get a box of shells for the shotgun, and we'll see whether I can do what I please in my own house!"

"That ain't going to do you nor him any good to-night," said Varney with a grin, as he helped himself to a chair. "Jest as quick as he gets far enough away from the house so's you can't hear him yell, I'll fix him so he won't never come back here again!"

"He can stay here all night if he wants to!" flared Nell.

"He'll be drug out of bed afore morning if he does!"

There was nothing to say to that. Gurk Varney could make good his threat if he wanted to, and he certainly was determined. Southpaw had no weapon, and there was no way of getting help. As always in time of trouble, his hands went mechanically to the fiddle case. He took out the instrument.

"That's right!" Varney chuckled. "Play something while I'm waiting for you to take your licking! Tune her up and saw off a jig! If you play good enough, I won't more'n half kill you!"

Southpaw glanced at Nell Macdougall. Her face was white and strained as she looked at him, and in it there was something he had wanted desperately to see there a few hours before. Now it was different. If by some miracle he escaped from the menace that loomed grossly across the room, he knew that he would not feel good enough to marry Nell Macdougall; not with the record of the days when he had thought of her as old-age insurance written indelibly upon his soul.

Southpaw began to play "Turkey in the Straw." The head of Gurk Varney began to wag and his feet to pat rhythmically upon the floor. Jones increased the time and the feet of Gurk beat a tattoo.

Suddenly Varney leaped from his chair and started to jig. His weight shook the house and his mouth opened to emit a roar of delight. "Whoops!" he yelled. "Play 'The Irish Washerwoman!'"

Southpaw Jones obeyed. Gurk Varney jumped into the air, cracked his heels together, and came down with a thud that jarred a plate from one of the pantry shelves. The music went faster and faster. Slowly in the mind of Jones an idea, at first thin as a cloud, was beginning to take form and substance. Now he bent to real work. His fingers raced upon the strings, and his eyes were fastened upon the jiggling Varney.

Southpaw rose from his chair a little at a time, as though lifted by the fascination of his own music. He began to keep time with one of his own feet while he fiddled madly and moved a few inches now and then. He fastened Gurk with

his eye; and as he moved, Gurk moved with him. Southpaw edged over toward one side of the room. Varney followed.

V.

IT was when the shoulder of Southpaw Jones touched the wall that the instant of his triumph came. There had been just room for him to fiddle Gurk Varney over the cellar door, left unprotected since his inspection of the afternoon. The moment that the weight of Gurk rested upon that door, he went down with a yell of terror as the hinges ripped their screws free from the floor.

There was a clatter and a thump as Varney and the door cascaded down the stairs. There came a groan and mutterings. With the chest of drawers over the opening, Gurk Varney would keep cool in the cellar until morning. Southpaw held out the instrument that had played Gurk off the stage and considered it.

"Fiddle," he said, "you've fed me many a time, and now you've pulled me out of the tightest place I ever was in! Much obliged!"

"Jim!" Nell Macdougall was coming toward him across the room with tears and joy and surrender in the blue depths of her eyes.

Southpaw backed up to get away from temptation and found himself against the wall. "I'm—I'm no good, Nell!" he cried. "I was going to try to marry you to get a good home, and I wasn't even ashamed of it until I looked at you after Gurk come in!"

She had him where he couldn't possibly get away, and he had to put his arm around her to keep her from falling; and she kept on smiling in spite of what he had said.

"It was the way you looked at me then that made me willing to marry you! And, besides, you didn't fool me any in the beginning!"



STILL ANOTHER INNING

By Reinhart Kleiner

IF right or left or center's what you play,
If second, third, or first is what you're hugging,
Remember, you'll be at the bat some day,
To do some slugging.

You'll get your chance to make the bleachers roar;
Perhaps a hoot with every cheer will mingle;
But do your best, though you do nothing more
Than land a single.

Who knows what skill or sudden might may come
To nerve your arm, before those watching faces—
To knock a homer that will leave them dumb,
And clear the bases?

But what if, after all, you fizzle out,
And hit the plate, and hear the thousands booing?
Don't let your disappointment and your doubt
Be your undoing.

Remember, on the diamond and in life,
There's still another game that waits the winning;
There's still, whatever rumors may be rife,
Another inning.

And Fate, the umpire, may be grim and cold,
With stern decisions that for years pursue you;
But do your stuff, and he will not withhold
The justice due you.



Where Angels Fear to Tread

By
Hapsburg Liebe



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

A PLAIN-SPOKEN SEA DOG.



WHEN the Florida East Coast Railway's seagoing train had gone thundering on, strapping young Delaney Kernan turned disappointedly from the Upper Matecumbe Key flag station and went back to the little wharf. Jessamine had written her father that he might expect her on that train, and she hadn't come. The major was entertaining a slight attack of sciatica; he had readily accepted Kernan's suggestion that he go to bring the girl out. The schooner was not so fast as the motor-driven cabin cruiser, but the distance was not great between Upper Matecumbe and the home of the Arwoods on Big Palm Key.

The crew of two stood eying their skipper solemnly as he climbed aboard. Little and wizened old "Peg" Rumley, who had one wooden leg and was as curious and as garrulous a man as ever drew life's breath, put a question into words. Youthful, voiceless "Dummy" Murdock, a giant in build, wearing his well-nigh everlasting smile, asked the same question by means of paper and pencil. A mere shake of the head was the answer they got.

"That's the way wi' wimmen!" Rumley exploded. "You don't never know how to take 'em!"

"We'll make sail," Kernan said quietly. He gave a sign to Dummy Murdock.

The mute sprang to obey, and Peg Rumley followed suit with an alacrity that was surprising in one of his age. Kernan had picked up this odd pair when they were alone and lonesome, when Rumley, at least, was down and almost out, and to them he was king and nothing that he did was wrong.

After the little sailing vessel had thrust her nose into an emerald-green channel that ran crookedly northward, Rumley clattered aft to Kernan, at the wheel.

"You'll have to 'scuse me, Del," said that sunburned wisp of a man, "for bein' so plain spoken. I believe I've heerd that Miss Jess and her paw was from the same place in Kaintucky as you. Is that right?"

It was one of his thousands of efforts to draw Kernan out, and, for a wonder, perhaps, it was in a measure successful. The habitually silent owner and skipper of the paintless and weatherworn old *Coralia* put a volume into a few words.

"Major Arwood and his daughter are from Kentucky, Peg, but not from my section. They're Carter County Arwoods, and I'm a Blue Grass Kernan, and they're proud of it, and so am I; you'd have to live up there twenty years to understand the distinction fully, I guess. I'll tell you pretty nearly the whole thing, Peg, and you won't need to be suspended between the devil of curiosity and the deep sea of asking questions in your roundabout, sidewise way any more.

"I began coming down here winters six years ago," Kernan went on, "when I was barely eighteen, with my father; he came for his health, and he died just year before last. Low, mangrove-green shores and palms, water that dances in the sunlight and breezes that whisper, had got under my hide, and I came back alone and bought the schooner, letting the big farm back in the Blue Grass sort of go hang; I've got a renter on it, but he isn't doing as much with it as he ought.

"Peg," he pursued, and it was evident that he disliked telling this, "the Arwoods had no business ability at all. They were of the dreamer breed, especially the old major; he was in the Spanish-American War, and it was then that he got his title and had his first glimpse of Big Palm Key. He settled on Big Palm when Jess was only a slip of a girl.

"Well, he was going to do wonders with avocado groves and banana plantations. But instead of doing wonders, he merely drifted, so to speak, with the tides—until the last year or so, that is, when things began to pick up fast for him; Big Palm avocados top all markets now, and the major is getting to be a rich man. The key has become a paradise, a charming little world in itself—but you know this, as well as I do. A group of Miami real-estate men, I understand, has offered a fifth of a million for it, as a development project; it's close enough, they think, to Miami. I guess that's all, Peg, and I hope you're satisfied."

"Not quite all," returned old Rumley with a grin, "but I know the rest. It was your paw that showed the major the way, and it was you that kept him in it. I mind the times without end when you brung Conchs and furriners to work his groves and settled his labor troubles with a club and carried supplies and other cargoes free for him. I dre'mpt that you even mortgaged your Blue Grass farm and lent him the money!

"You've been that there man's guarddeen, Del," he continued, "and hadn't been for you and your paw he wouldn't been worth nothin'. And why?—says you. Why, I says, because on account o' Miss Jess; and each time she's come back from her Miami schoolin' and visitin' she's a little more colder to you,

until now she's plum' above you! It ain't fair, Del, but that's the way wi' wimmen. You'll have to 'scuse me. You see, I'm a plain-spoken man."

Delaney Kernan's richly tanned face colored a trifle, then went a trifle pale. The ultraloyal Rumley tried his patience occasionally.

"You're a plain-spoken man, all right," he said sharply. "Take the wheel, and keep off the reefs."

The one-legged old sea dog took the wheel.

CHAPTER II.

STAR OF THE FILMS.

THE Blue Grass Kernan went into the dinky little cabin, sat down at a diminutive table, and began to stare at nothing in particular. He was very strictly a man's man and unwilling to admit, even to himself, that Rumley had put a finger on a sore spot; but Rumley had. Every living son of Adam has his ideals, in the musty back of his head if nowhere else, and one of them is always feminine. Not that Jessamine Arwood owed Kernan anything in the nature of a promise. Little had been understood between them, for the matter of that. For the most part, they had been—well, merely good fellows together.

The girl had gone to Miami, in the very middle of the winter season, to pay a visit to former schoolmates. These had entered her name and photograph in a newspaper's annual beauty contest, and she had won it. The natural result was that it had put the finishing touches on the complete turning of her head; she was young. The already lengthy visit had stretched to eight weeks.

Dummy Murdock had a soft way of walking; it was somewhat like the walk of a lion, Kernan had thought. Kernan looked up suddenly to see the voiceless giant standing beside him, smiling, smiling as always. Murdock threw his paper pad down on the table, and the Kentuckian read:

"I'm sorry, friend."

Friend! It was the best word, Delaney Kernan believed, in any language. How had Dummy known? But it seemed that Dummy knew everything. More than once, Peg Rumley had declared that

Murdock was only pretending that he was deaf and dumb, but Rumley was mistaken. Murdock was both intelligent and well read, and his sixth sense was highly developed. But there was a great secret locked in his breast—a secret, that is, so far as anybody in that part of the world was concerned.

It was tremendous fun to have a secret, Dummy thought; there was that much sheer boy in him. Kernan had observed that each time they happened into port at Key West a thick sheaf of mail awaited Philip Murdock, first-class mail with crests on some of the envelopes. This, however, had little or nothing to do with the secret.

"Thanks, old man," Kernan wrote. Then he added, a little resentfully: "But don't you believe that I've lost my compass, Philip!"

Murdock ignored that altogether, and wrote on the pad again. "This talk of cave men is all bosh. There are none any more; they have passed into the limbo of lost things. But women are still cave women, all of them. If you'll sort of kidnap her, as it were, she'll like it—and she'll forget Miami, and everything else, for you."

"Bunk!" cried Kernan. For all his easy-going manner and his taciturnity, there was dynamite in him, and the big mute had unwittingly touched it off. "Bunk! Rot! Get out of here, Dummy!"

Murdock smiled once more and then walked softly out. Evidently he had understood, as usual. Peg-legged old Rumley, at the wheel, shattered the ensuing silence by singing wildly a snatch from a song that sailors had stolen from Virginia and butchered shamefully:

Deep 'i' the sea, the mermaids pine
For Dandy Jim—oh, Dandy Jim—
Dandy Jim, o' the *Caroline!*

There was a steady southeast wind, and the little schooner slithered briskly through the dancing waters. Kernan stood leaning against the forward port rail, his gaze dead ahead, for two hours, almost without moving, except that at noontime he went to the galley for a lunch of bacon, hard-tack, and coffee that Murdock had prepared.

He sighted the low, deep-green shore of Big Palm Key a little before the middle of the afternoon, and then his keen eye picked up a dash of dazzling white at or near the spot where the Arwood wharf should be. He knew that the fruit-carrying steamers were never so white as that, and he wondered what manner of vessel it was that had dropped anchor at Big Palm during his brief absence.

The old *Coralia* slithered onward, and her skipper made out the lines of a yacht that was trimmed in polished brass and shining mahogany and fairly magnificent in its spotlessness. The distance lessened more, and he saw the name, *Orion*, in letters that looked like gold, across her stern. A few minutes later, he noted that under her name, in smaller letters, was "New Orleans." A sleepy-looking, bronzed man in white, lounging in a wicker chair on the yacht's after deck, waved a hand desultorily. Kernan merely nodded in recognition of it, a thing that was rather characteristic of him.

"Trouble," Rumley predicted, shaking his head.

The schooner nosed gently in against one end of the wharf through the adroit handling of her crew, and Kernan sprang over the rail and to the sun-baked floor. A merry shout from landward claimed his attention, and he saw Jessamine Arwood racing down between rows of coconut palms, blooming hibiscus, and bellflower and flaming poinciana. Jessamine had come home on the yacht.

"How are you, Del?" she cried girlishly, half breathless, as she drew up before him on the wharf and thrust out both hands for him to shake. "I missed you a lot—more than anybody else, maybe, except dad. I've got a load of the most wonderful news, Del—I ran all the way from the house to tell you. You couldn't possibly guess what it is!"

Poor Kernan's smile of greeting was pale. He had seen that she was dressed in the very height of fashion, which is sometimes more or less ridiculous, and that her copper-bronze hair—the most beautiful head of hair in the world, he had always thought—was not only bobbed, but shingled according to fashion's latest decree.

"Then I won't try to guess what the news is," he drawled.

She caught her breath again, and effervesced, bubbled over. "Father must have told you, Del, that I won the *Courier* contest—or did I write you, myself? Well, the big man of Prayther Productions, Incorporated, has chosen me for the leading woman's part in a super-special feature picture they're going to make in Miami and the Keys! Mr. Prayther says he will star me next year. Isn't it perfectly immense, Del? Just think of it!"

"Motion pictures, eh?" Kernan's countenance was very, very sober.

"Yes. We're not bound hand and foot to any fifty-fifty release contract, either. You see, we'll open with a fade-in long shot from an airplane at one edge of Big Palm, with some little keys in the far background, which will get over the idea of the locale; then we'll pan the camera, and bring it to bear on Big Palm, and iris down to the house; then we'll overlap dissolve into a closer shot of the house, with blah-blah titles fore and aft about the little-known Florida Keys and the romance of them, and—oh, Del, I simply can't tell you everything in a minute! Don't you think it is immense?"

"Immense, yes; immense rot."

He somewhat regretted his answer, afterward. It was honest, without doubt, but it was not a fine specimen of tactfulness.

"Why—Del Kernan!" Jessamine was dumfounded.

"How much money," he asked narrowly, "does this Mr. Prayther want your father to put into the business?"

The girl stiffened. She was almost angry now. "Mr. Prayther," she said with her head high, "has decided to permit my father to buy some stock in Prayther Productions. I wanted dad to take fifty thousand dollars' worth, but he can't get that much now. Later, Mr. Prayther says, he may be able to buy more."

A tomblike silence followed this. Then Kernan laughed oddly—uproariously and yet pityingly.

"That's rich, Jess!" he told her. "Later, perhaps, they will sell the major more stock, but not now! Oh, boy!

Pardon me for laughing, Jess. It's so very rich."

Jessamine was round-eyed. "Don't—don't you think it's legitimate?"

Kernan shrugged. "Oh, they'll make a picture; yes. And they'll see that they get theirs while the picture is being made; it's the stockholders that will hold the bag afterward, you see. This is an old game now, Jess. Once in a cat's age you do hear of a contractless production cleaning up, I'll admit; but you do not hear of the thousands of other such productions that never get shown to the public at all! It's a gamble, with everything against you."

"You know an awful lot about it!" cried Jessamine with fine sarcasm.

"Not so much." He tried to smile. "But I have a good friend in Tampa who does, because he lost about everything but his shirt in just such a proposition as this, and he's told me the story so many times that I remember every word of it. Who's going to be your leading man?"

"Mr. D'Armand," she replied eagerly. "And Mr. Glenn is the heavy—the villain, you know. They're both at the house now, with Mr. Prayther and the character woman; she's my mother, in the picture. The camera man is aboard the *Orion* there. You see, Del, we're going to begin shooting to-morrow morning. We'll take the scenes where the shipwrecked girl—that's me, you know—drifts to the key's shore on a hatch cover. We'll take them down there near the big copse of sea grape and mangrove, which will serve as a fine background for me as I crawl ashore—I'm to be exhausted, all in. Say, Del, would you mind our using your schooner in a few shots?"

"Of course not. What's to be the name of the picture?"

"'Where Angels Fear to Tread.' You must admit that it's an attractive title. Mr. Prayther calls it a 'wow,' a regular sure-fire 'killer.'"

"I see," said Kernan, his eyes twinkling and full of meaning. "'Fools rush in,' you know. There's something appropriate about it!"

The girl sobered much at that. She was about to speak again, when old Peg

Rumley, aboard the near-by sailing vessel, broke into a wail of song:

Oh, Dandy Jim, o' the *Caroline!*

Jessamine Arwood led toward the house this man who had been a guardian to both her and her dreamer father. She wanted him to meet Prayther; she believed it would alter certain of his opinions.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER A SHARK.

PRAYTHER was undoubtedly a person of some culture. He had a yellowish-brown Czar Nicholas beard and a manner that was almost Chesterfieldian. So carefully groomed was he that one was inclined toward feeling sorry for him because of a tiny scar that divided his left eyebrow. However, he was a little too smooth, a trifle too suave, and Kernan didn't like his eye; to those who are able to read them, a man's eyes are unfailingly a correct index to his traits.

As for the others, D'Armand was strikingly but uselessly handsome, and Glenn was as strikingly and as uselessly ugly, while the painted character woman had something that was both sad and pitiful about her. The three picture men wore linen knickers, silken shirts, loud shoes and stockings, and overhanging caps.

Evidently Prayther had heard something of Delaney Kernan's interest in the Arwoods' welfare, for he at once began to court Kernan's favor. First, he launched forth glowingly in a talk concerning the enormous profits gleaned by the great new industry. Next, he led the Kentuckian to a spot a few rods from the front of the picturesque old coral-rock house.

"What a shot!" he said rapturously. "A dozen shots—a hundred shots! Can you beat it? You cannot. The groves and plantation, the coconut palms, the gorgeous tropical flowers—it's the finest of picture stuff, Kernan, and the light here has an unbelievably high actinic value. Now come; let me show you something else."

They went to the wharf. Old Rumley and Dummy Murdock bent over the schooner's rail and watched closely. Rumley had overheard the conversation

between Jessamine Arwood and his skipper, shortly before, and he had already told the mute about it fully by the usual means of pad and pencil. Therefore, the two sailors were not one whit surprised when they saw Kernan clap a staggering hand on Prayther's shoulder and cut into his smooth flow of talk with this:

"Save all that good breath! You're not going to hook the Arwoods, and you'd as well forget it. Why in Hades will as brilliant a man as you be a crook when you could make twice as much money, with less trouble, in some legitimate line?"

"My dear Kernan!" the would-be producer exclaimed, seeming hurt. "Really, you are exceeding your province, if you'll pardon me. The major is not a child, you know, and motion pictures——"

Again Kernan cut in, and this time he deliberately shook a forefinger under Prayther's nose: "I told you to forget it, and you'll sidestep a lot of grief if you take my advice. Major Arwood is not going to put one red cent into your outfit!"

Prayther stared. Light footfalls were heard, and Murdock appeared close beside his skipper; he was smiling a smile such as one is apt to give a small boy who has been caught stealing. Prayther saw and clenched a fist.

"Don't do it!" exclaimed the Kentuckian. "This man is deaf and dumb, but he can thrash you in no time at all—and I won't stop him, either."

The picture man regained his composure in a flash, fingered his Czar Nicholas beard meditatively, and then turned toward the house.

Almost before breakfast was forgotten on the morning of the day following, Peg Rumley stumped into the schooner's cabin with news. "They're fixin' to take pitchers down there at the sea grape, Del. Miss Jess is dressed like a beggar and barefooted, and her face is painted and plastered until you'd hardly know it. Dum snuck off last night and was gone four hours, and where did he go, I asks you? The *Orion* ain't nowhere to be seen, Del, and the major is on the wharf waitin' to have a talk wi' you."

"Dum's a queer bird," Kernan muttered. "I don't know where he went last

night, and I don't know where the yacht went, and you can tell the major I'll be with him shortly."

Five minutes later, he drew up before old Arwood on the wharf. Jessamine's father was a thin gray man, with a countenance that suggested kindness rather than strength. His sciatica was forgotten now.

"You're wrong, Delaney," he began forthwith, "in your attitude toward Father. He's a gentleman of the first water, and he wouldn't stoop to do any dishonorable thing; I'm absolutely sure of that."

"If you're so sure of it," the younger man replied, "there's no need of my saying anything more against the proposition. You haven't got as much ready money as he wants, have you?"

"No," admitted Arwood. "But a little mortgage on Big Palm will turn the trick easily enough."

The other smiled peculiarly. "And when Prayther comes back from New York and tells you that the releases won't handle this first production unless you make three others to go along with it—a series of four of the same kind, you know—you'll put a big mortgage on Big Palm!"

"It won't happen," the major said. "But if it should, I can get the necessary funds."

Again Kernan smiled peculiarly. He uttered one short and simple, but very expressive word. "Ouch!"

The old dreamer turned soberly down the beach. The silence that came then was soon broken faintly by the distant voice of Prayther, directing:

"Ready, Miss Arwood. All right—camera—this is the picture! Keep in, Glenn. Now you see him, Miss Arwood—relief, at first—gladness, now—gladness, begin to show fear—not so fast, Glenn! Now collapse, Miss Arwood. Cut! That was fine, Miss Arwood, and I congratulate you."

There was a sound of hands clapping.

Delaney Kernan said to himself: "Well—I'll be eternally dashed!"

He realized suddenly that the giant Murdock was standing near him, and he motioned for paper and pencil. A few seconds later, Kernan had written this

question: "Where did you go last night, Philip?"

The mute took the pad and wrote: "Went fishing for a shark."

In a hasty scrawl, Kernan asked: "One that wears knickers and a pretty beard and walks like a man?"

Murdock nodded and pocketed the pad, thus signifying that he wished the conversation to end there. Oddly or not, it piqued Kernan a little. He motioned for pad and pencil, and put into writing this altogether startling announcement:

"We're going down to the railroad drawbridge over the neck of Amberjack Sound and hold up the morning Miami-bound train." To which he added: "Don't mind a little thing like that, Philip, do you?"

Philip wrote hastily: "You wouldn't ask me to help do this unless there was good reason for it. Is it in line with saving the Arwoods?"

The Blue Grass Kernan nodded. The two hurried aboard the schooner, where Kernan told his intention in the fewest possible words to Peg Rumley. That copper-bronze wisp of humanity threw up his hands and cried:

"Hold up a train! My heavens, Del! Have you lost your mind?"

"Not a bit of it. Quick—let's get away! As it is, we wouldn't have time to go to Matecumbe."

"But—but s'pose we miss the train at Amberjack draw?" Rumley muttered stupidly.

"Then we won't hold it up," returned the skipper with a grin.

CHAPTER IV.

A VERBAL BATTLE.

THE *Coralia* sped away shortly afterward, under all the canvas she had. Jessamine Arwood, on the beach near the copse of sea grape, stopped in the middle of a scene rehearsal, put her fine hands on her fine hips, and stared at the white-winged vessel. The youthful master, at the wheel, imagined he could hear her saying just what she said:

"I wonder what he's up to now?"

It was not far to Amberjack Sound and the railroad drawbridge that crossed the ship canal which connected the sound

with the open sea. Kernan, following his plan exactly, had himself put ashore a cable's length or so from the bridge, and Rumley and Murdock sailed the schooner slowly onward.

Rumley watched the clock in the cabin and very cleverly managed to have the draw open when the Miami-bound train was due. He pretended that the *Coralia* was aground, and engaged the bridge keeper in a verbal battle.

The train came to a halt, and Delaney Kernan sprang aboard it. A few minutes later, the schooner passed through; then the draw was closed, the train started, and Kernan sprang off. The old vessel took her skipper aboard soon afterward, and Peg Rumley at once nailed him with a question:

"Did you git what you went to git, whatever it was?"

The answer was in the affirmative, and brief, and the one-legged sea dog went on:

"I never heerd a single shot—Del, you never even took a gun wi' you!"

Kernan smiled and said nothing. There were times when he rather enjoyed seeing Peg writhe in the grip of his insatiable curiosity, and this was one of them. Besides, the Kentuckian never had been any great talker.

The production unit, so-called, kept busy that day until late in the afternoon, when the light became yellowish. They worked in copse, grove, the sea, and around the picturesque coral-rock house. Just when the sun was resting like a Brobdignagian blood orange on the Gulf's far-out rim, Jessamine Arwood gave proof that the breach between her and Kernan was not so wide, after all.

She went to Kernan, who had returned from Amberjack Sound, and asked him to have the schooner ready for use on the following morning. He agreed readily. The girl expressed her appreciation. He turned his gaze absent-mindedly toward the southeast.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "The *Orion* is coming back, I see," he remarked.

Jessamine saw the approaching yacht and nodded. "Mr. Prayther thought we'd soon need more raw stock—film, you know. And then, dad wanted to get

word to his banker to arrange a loan for him. We're getting a lot of fine stuff, Del, for 'Where Angels Fear to Tread.'"

"No doubt," Kernan remarked wisely.

When the Carter County Arwood had gone, Peg Rumley stumped up to his skipper, and said: "You'll have to 'scuse me, Del. You see, I'm a plain-spoken man. Are you goin' to let them robbers git clean away with it, or do you jest consider that it ain't none o' your funeral?"

"The major hasn't actually put any money into it, Peg, as yet," replied Kernan with a frown. "He won't be able to get the sum he wants for a day or so, which should give us time to spike Prayther's guns; as a matter of fact, maybe we've got them spiked now!"

Rumley's eyes were round. "Did the train holdup have anything to do with it, Del?"

"Considerable! And if that doesn't work, Peg, I think we'll kidnap Mr. Prayther and carry him off to keep Arwood from turning over the money to him."

"My heavens, Del—tell me all about it!"

"You'll know all about it soon enough," Kernan said. "Did you notice the little scar that cuts Prayther's left eyebrow in two?"

"Did I? Sure, I noticed it, Del! Pity, ain't it? Sweet potater! Well, what about it, anyhow?"

"I have an idea," the Kentuckian told Rumley, "that little scar is going to save the Arwoods a good many hard, cold dollars."

"Rumley shot questions at the younger man so fast that they almost overlapped, but Kernan refused to enlighten him just then. This was another of the times when Kernan rather enjoyed seeing old Peg writhe in the grip of his insatiable curiosity.

CHAPTER V.

FILM OVERBOARD!

THE three men aboard the *Coralia* had an early breakfast on the following morning, and they had not finished the meal when there was the staccato exhaust of a marine-type gasoline motor near by. Peg Rumley sprang up from the galley's little table and hastened to

the deck. A minute passed, and he was back with this information:

"Arwood's cabin cruiser is doin' the disappearin' trick this time! It's bound toward Miami, with only the major and one Conch aboard, far as I saw."

"The major has gone to get some forty thousand dollars for the picture outfit," Kernan guessed; and it was not a poor guess. "Maybe we'll have to kidnap Prayther yet, Peg."

"I'd sure enjoy it," Peg declared. "Le' me know when you're ready, Del."

A little later, Prayther came aboard with Jessamine Arwood, D'Armand, Glenn, the character woman, the camera man and his assistant, and the assistant director. They carried cases and suit cases, make-up bags and other impedimenta that goes with motion-picture production. The schooner's master surrendered the cabin to the two women and concealed his true feelings admirably when he told the unit's high light that both vessel and crew awaited his pleasure.

"We must have open water, with at least a few swells, without a background except the sea itself for a number of scenes," said Prayther, his manner quite lofty. "And I'd like some well-defined clouds, Kernan, with sun rays shining through them, if possible, for a pretty fade-out scene to close a sequence."

The Kentuckian wished to say sarcastically that he'd order a few such clouds made at once, but he didn't. Soon afterward, the *Coralia* headed her paintless bows toward territory that was not so thickly dotted with mangrove-rimmed keys and keylets.

The "shooting" began about the middle of the morning. The heroine escaped the villain's clutches and sprang overboard, to be rescued by the hero. Hero and villain had two weak fights on the deck, another in the rigging, and still another in the water. They towed the villain through a quarter of a mile of sea at a rope's end, and then shot him with an automatic pistol fully as large as a suspender buckle.

On and on the tireless camera clicked and clicked and clicked. Noontime had come and now was dim in the past. Instead of growing weary, Jessamine Ar-

wood appeared as fresh as she had been in the beginning; the girl was dazzled, dazzled, drunken with the wine of the dreamer.

All throughout the afternoon, Delaney Kernan had kept straining his eyes toward the northwestern horizon. Unable to hold in any longer, apparently, Peg Rumley wanted to know what it was that claimed the skipper's attention in the far reaches of the Gulf.

"It isn't something that I see," Kernan answered very soberly; "rather, it's something that I do not see. You've a good pair of eyes in your head, Peg; suppose you watch the northwest for me and let me know the minute you sight anything at all, eh?"

At last the light began to turn yellow. They were hurrying through with the day's last scene. The camera had been set up beside the stern railing, just back of the wheel, which Dummy Murdock held faithfully against a steady beam wind. Suddenly the wheel slipped from the giant mute's hands and spun, and somehow—nobody saw just how—Murdock banged against the camera and sent it over the railing.

"You blockhead!" roared Prayther, purple faced, his eyes flashing in quick rage. "You boob! That camera cost as much as this schooner!"

One needed no ears in order to understand that. Philip Murdock's well-nigh everlasting smile faded out and left his tanned face a dangerous gray. The silence seemed charged. No person moved. The big man at the wheel held it quite still. After racing for a cable's length or so, Murdock swung the old *Coralia* straight into the eye of the wind, so that her sails hung empty over her thrashing booms, and started for Prayther.

It was Kernan that rushed between them. "Stop, Dummy!" he cried, forgetting Murdock's affliction.

The mute stopped.

Still forgetting, Kernan put his tongue to a bitter arraignment. "You've made an awful mess, Dum; a kid would know better! Instead of throwing something off to mark the spot, you ran right on. Prayther was correct—you are a boob and a blockhead!"

Murdock stared. Kernan was his friend, and he seemed unable to believe what his own eyes beheld. But there was no mistake. He went white with hurt, turned, and walked slowly forward.

Jessamine Arwood spoke sadly, and that which she said was truth. "I've noticed that your nerves are keyed as high as fiddle strings, Del, but you certainly didn't have to talk to Philip like that."

Kernan snapped about, facing her. But his anger trembled before the fineness of her gaze; he saw the true Jessamine Arwood, the old Jessamine, in that moment. One hasty step he took toward her, and she stood her ground like a rock.

"When are you expecting your father back?" he asked lamely.

"To-night," she told him. "Dad went to the bank——"

Quickly her lips closed; she hadn't meant to say it. But he knew, anyway.

"Del, why do you act so?" she inquired.

The Blue Grass Kernan did not answer. He looked aside and noted that Peg Rumley was at the wheel and righting the schooner. Another moment, and he had taken a firmer grip than ever on things. "Lay a course a few points west of Cape Sable, Peg," he ordered grimly, "and keep an eye out for Shark Reefs. We're kidnaping Mr. Prayther."

"Man, what are you talking about?" Prayther cried.

"I'm going to take you where the major can't find you to give you forty thousand of his hard-earned dollars," growled Kernan. "I'm master of this ship, and she goes exactly where I want her to go. Do you understand that?"

Prayther's countenance was a study. His jaw hung. Nervously he clawed at his Czar Nicholas beard, and the tiny scar that divided his left eyebrow showed a clean white. Then his eyes flashed wide, and his jaw closed with a snap. "My dear sir!" he expostulated. "Why, that's piracy—piracy on the high seas. If you do this, you'll answer for it, I promise you!"

"Piracy, eh?" sneered Kernan. "Maybe it is. All right; I'll answer for it, but not to you."

"Yah! Yah! Yah!" taunted the de-

lighted, peg-legged old Rumley, putting over a spoke.

Once more the skipper of the *Coralia* scanned the northwestern horizon and, as before, saw nothing more than the seemingly endless, softly swelling, emerald-and-violet sea. Then he quietly set about the task of making his passengers as comfortable in the matters of food and sleeping quarters as the little vessel's accommodations would permit.

For the first time since they had been together, Philip Murdock sat and brooded and did not lend a hand, and Kernan stiffly refrained from even glancing in his direction.

Later, when darkness came creeping and the rust-red anchor had rumbled down, the mute rose willingly to the occasion when Rumley suggested that he take the first of the night's three watches. Kernan had the second watch, which ended at two o'clock in the morning. He went to sleep listening to Peg Rumley sing in a low voice to the thousand bright stars that peered down, as though amusedly, at his wizened, old-copper face:

Deep i' the sea, the mermaids pine
For Dandy Jim—oh, Dandy Jim—
Dandy Jim, o' the *Caroline!*

CHAPTER VI.

HARD TO CONVINCED.

THE schooner's master was the last person aboard to wake on the next morning, a thing that is not strange when one considers that he had been the last person aboard to go to sleep on the night before. He opened his eyes to see his two sailors standing on the deck near him.

Murdock had a capstan bar in his hands, and Rumley was nursing a rusty revolver. Then Kernan sat up and noted that Prayther and his men stood a short distance down the deck, their attitude threatening.

"Better go aft, Prayther," Kernan drawled, "while your rose-leaf skin is nice and whole."

There was no reply and no move. Peg Rumley grinned. Murdock snatched pad and pencil from his pocket, wrote a few lines so hurriedly that they were almost

illegible, and tossed the pad to Kernan without looking at him.

Kernan read: "There's a big cabin launch coming like a bat out of Hades from the northwest and another coming just as fast from the southeast."

The youthful skipper sprang to his feet and turned his gaze quickly, eagerly, toward Cape Sable. "Dorn!" he muttered, smiling. "At last!"

"The other cruiser is the major's, Del," Rumley told him. "Who's Dorn?"

Kernan turned suddenly upon the old man. "Give me that gun, Peg."

Rumley shrugged a little and tossed the weapon to its owner. Prayther began to edge away.

"They was for takin' command o' the schooner," Peg said, then. "Who's Dorn, anyhow?"

"You'll soon know."

Jessamine Arwood, in her proper clothing, her face a picture of queerly mingled wonderment and chagrin, hastened to Kernan. "I want to say a word for Mr. Prayther, Del," she began hurriedly. "You don't——"

"Pardon me, Jess," he cut in. "Wait for just one hour, and then say all you want to say for Prayther."

Of the two flying cabin cruisers, the one from the northwest was first by a minute to run up beside the *Coralia*. A rather large, middle-aged man, dressed well, was leaning out of the cockpit. He recognized the sailing vessel's skipper, and shouted with marked cordiality:

"Hello, Blue Grass!"

"My regards to Frankfort!" Kernan laughed. He ran down the railing and shook hands with D. H. Willett. "You got my wire, I see; I had to hold up a train to find somebody that could send it from Miami for me in time! Come aboard and meet some of my friends, Dorn."

It was not difficult to board the low-sided schooner from the motor-driven cruisers. Prayther helped the major over one rail. Del Kernan assisted Willett over the other, and at once proceeded to introduce him, before the wondering gaze of the others, to the promoter.

"Delighted——" began Prayther, and stopped abruptly. He went ashen, wilted, seemed smothering.

Their hands never met.

Well pleased, Kernan said: "Mr. Willett, I want you to get acquainted with Major Arwood, an old and very good friend of mine; he's from Carter County; and I want you to tell the major, briefly, of your experience in pictures."

Arwood advanced slowly and shook the newcomer's hand; he had the air of one who is mystified and somewhat dazed.

Dorn Willett began to talk. "It's a pleasure to meet you, major. Del Kernan's father and I were boyhood friends, and Del was always rather close to me. But to pictures——"

"Well," he went on, "Mr. Prayther—whom I knew, incidentally, under another name—interested me in his proposition, and I admit I fell hard for the glamour of it. I financed a so-called 'superspecial,' and Prayther took it to the New York markets. We had no contract for release—Prayther said we shouldn't be tied to a contract, and I believed him. But it seemed that the distributors wanted pictures in series of four of the same kind, because four could be advertised as cheaply as one; so I listened further to Prayther and financed three other productions, hoping, you see, to save the first.

"Major," Willett continued, iron in his voice now, "I regret to say that not one of the four was ever shown to the public at all and that I will probably never recover a cent of the fortune I poured into them. The only person who made anything much out of it was Prayther; he drew a big salary for himself, and I have proof now that he grafted unbelievably everywhere—I've an officer of the law aboard the cruiser that brought me here, ready to come when I call him, and Prayther is going to pay for his crookedness. I have no doubt whatever that he knew all along that the pictures would never be released!"

He turned to Kernan. "How did you ever recognize him, Del?"

"I remembered your telling me about a mole on his left eyebrow. He's had the mole removed, but it left a scar," Kernan answered.

He stepped to Major Arwood, who stood fingering a certified check for forty thousand dollars.

"Are you convinced now, major?"

Arwood began to stare silently at nothing. Dreams are harder for the old to give up than for the young. "There must be a mistake—somewhere," he half-whispered. "Prayther can't possibly be crooked, Delaney."

CHAPTER VII.

FROM THE SEA.

AT that moment, Dummy Murdock tapped Kernan on the shoulder. Kernan faced about and took from the mute's fingers a slip of paper. Murdock made a sign for caution.

Kernan read the few lines slyly and suppressed a shout of triumph. "All right!" he signed jubilantly; then the two sprang into action.

Immediately afterward, almost, the *Coralia* sailed toward Big Palm Key. Peg Rumley steered, and Kernan and Murdock stood together as far forward as they could conveniently get. The rest of the party was aft and amidships and chatting now about anything but that which was paramount in their minds.

The skipper suddenly borrowed his companion's pad and pencil, and wrote: "You're solid gold, Philip, and I was a brute yesterday. I ask your pardon, Philip."

Their hands met and clasped.

Kernan put pad and pencil into use again: "Will you tell me how it came that you knew about so many things and especially the camera?"

Murdock hesitated for but a second. He covered several of the little pages with his characteristic chirography: "It was shell shock in France that made me deaf and dumb. The doctors said that I would some time recover, and I am already beginning to hear again. I have kept this a secret; for one reason why, because I was afraid it wouldn't come true! I've stayed away from home—Chicago—because I felt that I'd be a burden to relatives and friends if I didn't and because I couldn't bear their heartbreaking kindness.

"You remember the letters with the crests? There is a girl, Del, and she's waiting for me. As for the camera and the night I was gone for four hours, I

was watching Prayther on the *Orion* and trying to overhear what it was they said. I believe you'll find that I guessed well."

Shortly after the Kentuckian had read the message, Jessamine Arwood walked softly up to him from behind. Jessamine was trying hard to be a good loser. "That was twice, Del Kernan," said she, pretending to be piqued, "that you've shaken hands with Philip in the last ten minutes; I've been watching you. Del, I'm jealous!"

"Goodness be thanked!" exclaimed Kernan, and there was more fervor in it than he realized.

With permission, he passed Murdock's most recent message to the girl. Jessamine read it, then she dropped a tear of tenderness on the hand of the giant that they had known chiefly as "Dummy" and kissed it in the bargain.

Kernan went toward the wheel some time later, with Murdock following. The schooner soon began a series of circling movements, the mute directing the helmsman by means of signs. Once they were in a direct line with the edge of one small key and a lone cabbage palm that grew upon another, grappling hooks were put over the vessel's stern and the bottom of the shallow sea dragged.

It was a tedious undertaking, but perseverance won at last. Up from the water came the motion-picture camera. Murdock had marked the spot with his eye. Before them all, Delaney Kernan opened the machine.

There was not an inch of film in it.

"They wanted to be sure they got your money, you see," Kernan explained to the major, "before they spent anything at all on you. You've been walking, surely, 'Where Angels Fear to Tread!' The title of the 'picture' was appropriate, wasn't it?"

Old Arwood stood fully convinced, at last. He paled at this indisputable proof of Prayther's sheer, stark villainy. It was Dorn Willet, of Tampa, that prevented his flying at Prayther's throat.

"The law will take care of him," said Willet. "Don't soil your hands."

Kernan took the wheel for the rest of the little voyage, and Jessamine kept beside him. Wise old one-legged Peg Rumley assumed complete charge of the

deck and began to herd the others forward much as one herds unruly cattle—and that without a word of explanation. As he followed them around a corner of the cabin, he called back to his skipper and his king, with a sly, sly wink:

"They'll jest have to 'scuse me, Del. You can tell 'em, if you want to, that I'm a plain-spoken man."

When only the girl and the helmsman were left on the after deck, the Carter County Arwood said with all the sincere frankness of the newer generation:

"Delaney, I think you could manage the steering with one hand, at least for a few minutes, couldn't you? Just to show that you forgive me."

The Blue Grass Kernan promptly furnished complete and absolute evidence that her conclusion was correct.

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole.



OUT THERE

By Ross C. Miller

WHERE the snow line curves to a colored change
 From white to a shimmering green;
 Where the sky is a foil to the mountain range,
 That never a cloud dare screen;
 Where the sun leaps up like a golden ball
 And the air is God's own breath;
 Where even the sadness of gentle fall
 Speaks only of joy in death—

That is the picture which greets my eye
 As I watch through my window here,
 And I mope in an office heaving a sigh
 With only my dreams to cheer.
 I long to harvest the golden health
 That grows in the mountain air,
 Where only the spring of your muscles is wealth
 And it's death for the demon Care;

Where the fighting trout leaps up to the fly,
 That hangs from a silken thread;
 Where at night your roof is the starlit sky
 And fresh-killed buck your bread;
 Where your skin grows hard as the chaps you wear
 In this world that's all your own;
 Where you shoot and kill your very first bear
 And you skin him, out there alone.

Ah, that's the dream my thoughts now span
 While I work—and work some more;
 And I hope to fulfill my mighty plan,
 Though life seems such a bore.
 But the open calls, and I'm going to roam
 Away from the city's strife,
 Back to the cloud-kissed peaks, my home,
 To be out there—with life.

The Test

Supreme ~



By
W.E. Schutt ~

(A NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

SPRINTING AHEAD.



It was the beginning of the last quarter of the mile race. Clyde Wallace, running his first race in big company, could scarcely believe what the fates were giving him. Here he was, a green youngster, put into the race merely for experience as Dan Quirk, the trainer, had admitted. He had stood the pace of a burning first half that had brought the spectators to their feet with a wild burst of cheers. He had mowed down both the Mercury Club's best milers, and that was no small accomplishment.

Now, fresh as a daisy, he thought, he was running shoulder to shoulder with the captain of his own club, who was the metropolitan champion at the distance. It was all incredible to Wallace. He scarcely knew what to do about it.

True enough, the race wasn't over yet, and the Mercury Club had a much vaunted dark horse, who had set that burning first half-mile pace, somewhere behind. Wallace didn't dare look how far behind, for Dan Quirk had taught him the fatal error of looking back. This man might yet come through and beat Wallace.

It was likewise true that Neil Robson, captain of the Olympic Club, had been off the track with a bad cold for the past four days and was not yet fit. It was true, too, that Robson was saving himself

all he could, because of the indoor championships in the week to come.

What could Wallace do about this present case? Could he, dared he, a green and inexperienced youngster, beat the captain of his own team, a man for whom he had the deepest friendship and gratitude?

Little by little, Wallace moved up even with Captain Robson and mutely asked with his eyes what he should do about it. Robson, who was having tough going of it, saw his teammate with relief.

"Go on out—to your limit!" Robson panted. "Give 'em all you've got. Don't mind me. That dark horse of theirs—make it safe—sew it up—good work, Wally."

With that, Wallace let loose. The bell signaled the last lap. The band blared into a tune that added inches to his stride. The crowd made the armory shake with sudden din in appreciation of his sprint. Wallace was running now as if his feet were wings.

At the last corner before the straight-away, he dared a glance back. Eight yards behind, a safe distance, Neil Robson was fighting it out with the Mercury dark horse. Nevertheless Wallace got up on his toes and skimmed down to the tape with as pretty a sprint as the fans had seen in many a day.

The broken tape still streaming from his chest, he slowed down and turned to see his captain win from the Mercury man by just enough inches. Robby had

saved his strength nicely, as he had to do, considering his condition. Wallace knew suddenly a great respect for Neil Robson and, waving away as useless those of the officials who offered him their assistance, approached the tottering Robson with something like shame and apology in his demeanor.

Robson clasped his hand in congratulations, and in his eyes there was nothing but delight. "Fine work, Wally, old man! I knew you could do it, and I'm glad you showed 'em. Guess that justifies me in bringing you into the club, eh?"

"But are you sure you aren't angry at me for beating you?" Wallace asked, as if he could not understand Robson's attitude.

Dan Quirk, who had come up to them with a crowd of others, his wrinkled face wreathed in a rare smile, grinned with quiet irony. "Good work, youngster! But don't get too cocky about it. Robby wasn't all in, not by a long shot."

That made Wallace feel uncomfortable for a second. Robson came to his relief, however.

"That's only Dan's way of keeping you from getting swell-headed about running a darned fine race. You won fair and square, and no one's more tickled than I am."

There were more congratulations from those who were permitted inside the track. The applause of the audience died down as the announcer picked up his megaphone. They all listened for the time.

"Four minutes, twenty-two seconds!"

"And that time," said Robson, "clinches all talk about my letting you through to win. I guess what I told you last summer isn't right, eh, boy?"

Wallace knew that Robson was all sincerity about it. That story of last summer was proof in itself. It was all club legend by this time, one of those traditions that go down and down.

It was, in brief, the story of how Wallace came to the club in the first place. Robson, using an early-spring vacation on a walking trip through the upper part of the State, had found himself in a small village on the day of the local high school's annual athletic meet.

He had taken it in, of course, following his natural bent. He had seen a big, husky, rather awkward farm lad, running in rubber-soled sneaks and cut-down underclothes, win every running event from the quarter up to the two miles.

The youngster's name was Clyde Wallace. Robson couldn't pass up such a stroke of fortune. He went out to Wallace's home that night to get permission from his parents to bring him to New York. Robson had already won over Wallace with the promise of making him a national champion within three years, if he would join the Olympics. He won Wallace's parents' permission by promising them to look out well for the youngster and get him started in a good business. Thus the bargain was struck, and Neil Robson realized that his responsibility in regard to Wallace was no small one.

Robson accomplished his end of the bargain by getting Wallace a job with his own firm. Wallace fulfilled his end of it by making good at his job, by pleasing every man in the club even if his untutored ways did cause quiet amusement, and now, lastly and most importantly, by coming through so laudably in his first big race.

Wallace could have no doubt of Neil Robson's sincerity, in view of all the events of the past year. Clearly he hadn't done anything so very wrong when he defeated Robson.

The announcer called the next event. The small crowd about the runners began to scatter to this next interest. Robson and Wallace stood about for a moment, swathed in bath robes.

A ringing call for "Robson" came across the track. Both men looked toward its source. Wallace saw a stranger sitting in the front row of seats just opposite the finish, a man of twenty-five or so, rather plump, red-faced, dressed in a luxurious ulster, silk muffler of expensive quality, and all the appurtenances of a well-dressed man. Beside him, evidently his companion, there sat a very lovely girl.

"Rex Tallman, hang it!" Robson muttered under his breath. Aloud he called back, "Hullo, Tallman!" in no very engaging tone.

"Come on over, Robby, and bring your new world beater."

Robson hesitated. Tallman saw his indecision, but was evidently one of those men who take no thought of another's unwillingness in opposition to his own desires.

"Do you want to meet him?" Robson asked Wallace, in an undertone.

"Come on, Robby!" called Tallman. "Miss Harkness wants to meet you both."

It was impossible to ignore or say no to such a request. Robson led Wallace over, and introductions were exchanged. Tallman dominated the conversation from the start.

"You cost me an even hundred dollars to-night, Robby," Tallman said jovially.

"How's that?"

"I bet a hundred with a Mercury man that you'd win the mile. And here Wallace drops out of the clouds and spoils it all. Sure you didn't purposely let him through to win, Robby?"

Robson side-stepped the question. "I'm sorry you lost. It never occurred to me that any one would be betting on the race."

Miss Sylvia Harkness spoke up at that. "A hundred dollars isn't so terribly much, Rex. Besides, you shouldn't be betting all the time."

Wallace thought he had never in his life heard a voice to equal hers. His eyes flashed her his gratitude.

Tallman took her faint censure in good part. "That's true enough, Sylvia. What's a hundred dollars between friends? I'll get it back sometime with interest. Nobody ever puts it over twice on little Rex!" He laughed.

They chatted idly for a moment until the next race was started. Then Robson turned away, and Wallace followed him.

"Who is this chap Tallman?" Wallace asked.

"Hard to tell you who he is—or what. Some sort of broker downtown, I believe. Lots of easy money. Athletic fan, but can't do anything himself. Chief pastime seems to be hanging around the various clubs and knowing athletes. Seems to get a great deal of satisfaction out of being seen with athletes and calling them his close friends."

"You don't seem to like him very well," Wallace commented.

"I don't. We've had a run-in a couple of times. He's got no use for me. And excuse my saying it, Wally, but he's no one for you to cultivate."

"Miss Harkness seems pretty fine."

"Tallman always runs around with pretty girls," Robson returned carelessly.

"Do you think he was angry with you for losing him that hundred?" Wallace asked.

"I'm not even sure that he bet it. He's a bluffer. You can never tell whether he's angry with you or not—and it doesn't much matter."

Wallace saw that Robson was in no mood for talking further of Tallman and dropped the matter with that. He dropped it rather unwillingly, for he liked Tallman so far as he knew him and liked Miss Harkness much better.

CHAPTER II.

WITH AMAZING SUDDENNESS.

THE two men separated in the dressing room. Wallace, after having heard the hearty congratulations of his teammates, went leisurely about his dressing. Robson went back out on the track after his rubdown, to follow the progress of the rest of the meet.

Wallace hadn't yet completed his dressing when he was surprised by a visit from Rex Tallman, who came into the dressing room as matter-of-factly as if he were a member of the club. To "Swede" Hellman, one of the team's rubbers, who would have barred his way, Tallman said in his breezy fashion:

"An old friend of long standing of Mr. Clyde Wallace's, and he'd have a broken heart and you a broken back if you barred my way to him. So please step aside, or go ask him if he doesn't want to see me."

Wallace could not refuse him. Tallman had come to him, it appeared, on an errand that pleased Wallace greatly.

"You sort of made an impression on my friend Sylvia, I reckon. I ought to be jealous, but for some reason I'm not. I believe in passing a good thing around."

"I don't understand you," Wallace said awkwardly.

"I haven't yet said anything to be understood, to tell the truth," Tallman returned. "Fact is, Miss Sylvia Harkness has designated me as ambassador extraordinary to beg you to have supper with the two of us to-night, in a little place I know on Seventh Avenue. After that, we may adjourn to my flat, if the idea strikes you right, or we'll see you safe to your own little cot."

"You—you mean it?"

"Why, sure I mean it! Or do you want it written out?"

Wallace laughed uneasily at himself. "Guess I am a boob. I'll be glad to come."

"But no gladder than we are to have you. Soon as you've finished dressing, come to us. You know where we sit."

"Sure! I'll be there right away."

Tallman left the dressing room. Wallace hurried into his attire with all the speed compatible with the appearance he must make before Miss Harkness. As he started out, Neil Robson came in.

"Off for home so early?" Robson asked. "Wait a second and I'll go with you. Everything's about done out there now, and we've got the meet sewed up."

"I'm sorry, Robby, but—but I've got another engagement," Wallace stammered, suddenly ill at ease.

"Oh, yes?" Robson questioned him with his eyes, if not in fact, for it was a most unusual announcement to come from Wallace.

"Ye-uh," Wallace went on, feeling forced to make some explanation. "Rex Tallman—or rather Miss Harkness—asked me to go to supper with them. And Dan told us we could let down on training for to-night——"

"The rascal! What's Tallman after now?" Robson ejaculated, principally to himself.

"Nothing, I suppose. It's Miss Harkness——"

Robson scowled. "Well, it can't be helped now. But you watch your step, Wallace, and watch it mighty carefully. And—I know you can't very well get out of this, now you've accepted—but it would be just as well for you to be awfully busy for a month, the next time Rex Tallman wants to do you a favor."

Wallace departed. Robson silently

went about his changing. It looked very much to him as if he were due for another run-in with Rex Tallman. Hospitality such as Tallman had offered Wallace should not have been accepted by the runner.

For Wallace it was an unforgettable evening. Tallman and Miss Harkness took him to one of the best-known supper places in New York. Its soft lights and lovely women, its gay orchestra and unusual food surpassed anything in Wallace's previous experience.

Miss Harkness was very gracious to him, and she could be nice when she wished. Her lustrous brown eyes held Wallace entranced across the table, and her delightful voice and unspared compliments enthralled him. All this, coming as it did on top of the exaltation he felt from winning the race, was enough to ensnare any man.

She danced with him as often as he asked. She got him to tell her of his home, of his discovery as a runner by Robson, of his plans and his ambitions. Tallman did not talk much. He resigned Miss Harkness to Wallace and sat back and listened with a contented smile. The evening passed all too quickly. Wallace was hoping by this time that Tallman would find means of continuing it, but Tallman had other plans.

"Now we'll take you home, youngster, and thanks very much for giving us such a treat."

"Awfully good of you," Wallace returned, looking straight at Miss Harkness. "I've had the time of my life!"

"Probably just what you needed by way of a little break in your training," Tallman said. "We can't let it go too far. My good friend Neil Robson is likely to accuse me of leading you astray if I don't take you home now. It's eleven o'clock."

"Robson's sort of queer sometimes," Wallace said dreamily.

"Robby's all right," Tallman remarked cordially, "only I've learned that he tries too much to dictate every little detail of the lives of the men on his team. Your man of spirit won't stand for that, of course."

Just before they left the restaurant,

there came up to their table a middle-aged, prosperous-looking man, of such a powerful frame and alert bearing that Wallace guessed he once had been an athlete. The newcomer knew Tallman, who introduced him as Martin Crandall, one-time senior champion in the shot put.

Crandall had seen Wallace's race that night and took many minutes praising him for it. Then, as he left, he gave Wallace a card, bearing the inscription:

"Crandall & Forbes, Electrical Machinery."

The address was in lower New York.

"Come in and see me sometime, if ever you are downtown," Crandall said cordially. "Just say who you are, and the girl will send you in to me as soon as I can see you."

"Thanks!" Wallace responded.

"Especially if you want a job," went on Crandall. "I like athletes on my staff. They've got the pep, the go-out-and-get-'em spirit that means more money to all of us. What are you doing now, by the way?"

"Receiving clerk for Salter & Williams."

Crandall opened his heavy eyes at that. "What? Clerk, did you say? You—receiving clerk?"

Wallace was suddenly ashamed of the position he held, for which he had been so grateful to Neil Robson. "Yes; that's it," he admitted, avoiding Miss Harkness' eyes.

"The nerve of 'em! You come in and see me—the sooner the better. Say tomorrow. I'll stay after six to see you, if you can't get away earlier. Or say, what time do you go out to lunch?"

"About twelve o'clock usually."

"Come in and see me then. I'll be waiting for you."

Wallace, taken off his feet with incredulity, felt Crandall's mighty grasp upon his hand, muttered his promise, and knew that Crandall was gone.

"Isn't that luck for you!" Miss Harkness exclaimed. "That's what comes of being a famous athlete!"

"Is he—on the square?" Wallace asked Tallman.

"Why, of course he is!" was the reply. "He'll be hurt if you don't go see him. He's got a big concern there, and he

takes a particular fancy to athletes, just as he says, probably because he was one himself. You'll miss a fine chance if you pass him up."

After that, they left the restaurant. They took a taxi up to West Sixty-fifth Street where Wallace roomed. Before they dropped him, Miss Harkness had extended to him an invitation to call on her at her home on the next night, to tell her the outcome of his conference with Martin Crandall.

Tallman asked him to have dinner with him for the same purpose. Wallace accepted both invitations in a sort of stupor of too much happiness. Life had opened up for him with amazing suddenness.

CHAPTER III.

PAY WHEN DELIVERED.

NEXT day at noon Wallace went to the huge building in which the business of Crandall & Forbes was housed. The elevator shot him quickly up to the fifth floor, where the general offices were. It appeared to Wallace that Crandall's orders had preceded him.

No sooner had he mentioned his name to the switchboard girl, than she designated an office boy to show him in to Crandall. Crandall, engaged in dictating to a stenographer when he entered, dismissed the stenographer at once and rose to meet him.

"I was a little afraid you wouldn't come at all, Wallace," Crandall said.

"I don't think I'm always such a fool, Mr. Crandall, as I must have appeared to be last night. Last night I was sort of— Well, swell-headed, I guess."

"I know, I know, my boy. I know exactly how a victory makes a man half drunk with excitement. Well, I'm glad you came. I've just this morning found the right opening for you. Stockkeeper on the assembling floor. It'll teach you our products and put you right in line for a position as salesman. How is that as compared with receiving clerk, eh?"

"I don't know much about it, I must admit."

"Salary's the chief thing, isn't it?" Crandall laughed. "How much do you get where you are now?"

"Twenty-two a week."

"I thought so. Here you'll get thirty to start and a raise of five, after three months."

"I think I'd be a fool not to take it. But I really must ask Neil Robson's advice about it. You see, Robson got me the——"

A queer change came over Crandall's face, a sudden sternness, disapproval, or something which Wallace could not understand. Yet when he spoke, his voice was as cordial as ever.

"There is another little matter, Wallace, which we must understand before you can accept. The fact is, I'm—— Well, a member, at any rate, of the Mercury Athletic Club. And of course I want to——well, I want to see you running the mile for us."

"But I belong to the Olympics, you know, Mr.——"

"Of course, of course! I know that. That's all right for the rest of the indoor season. Run for them next Saturday night if you want to. But for the outdoor season, join up with us. As a club, we've got the Olympics beaten a mile——club house, jolly bunch of men, all good fellows.

"I'll admit that we haven't right now a very good track team," he went on, "and that's exactly what we want to build up. That's why I want you. It's all bona fide. Nothing irregular about it. Neil Robson got you a job before you came here, didn't he, and that is all on the level? So is this offer of mine. Only my offer is—you'll have to admit it yourself—a whole lot better than Robson's."

All the time Crandall had been talking thus persuasively, Wallace had been thinking hard. Now, for the first time, he saw what was behind all this. He wondered to what extent Tallman was an agent of Crandall's. He knew that Miss Harkness was not, and that she had no inkling of all this. His mind was made up by the time Crandall had finished speaking.

"It is a liberal offer and all that, Mr. Crandall, but I'm sticking to the Olympics."

Crandall looked surprised, but not displeased. "So that's the sort of lad you are, eh? Well, I want you more than

ever for the Mercury Club. I'll start you here at thirty-five dollars——"

"No, thanks. I owe it to Robson and the Olympics——"

Crandall waved a hand to silence him. "Don't say any more now, son," he said genially. "Just think it over. Go home and think it over. Then you won't have to swallow your own words. The offer's always open. Remember that. And thanks for coming in."

Crandall's long business training had made him an adept at dismissing people without hurting their feelings. He pleasantly returned the smile that was on Wallace's face as he showed his visitor out. He had planted the seed he wished to grow and was content to abide by failure or success. Though he had rather slight hope of success, he felt a great deal of satisfaction at finding Wallace to be the man he was.

Crandall recalled his stenographer for the interrupted dictation, but had not proceeded far with it when another caller was announced to him—Rex Tallman.

"Show him in," he ordered the telephone girl.

When Tallman came in, he said: "This is a surprise visit. What can I do for you, Tallman?"

"I was wondering how you made out with young Wallace," Tallman replied. "Thought I'd drop in and find out."

"What do you know about my business with him?"

Tallman smiled. "It wasn't hard to guess, considering what I heard last night and considering how you are trying to build up the Mercury team. That is, of course, really why you came over and braced us last night."

"Well, yes; I'll have to admit it." Crandall returned in a manner none too friendly.

"And I'm inclined to think that you didn't have any luck. I'm guessing that, Mr. Crandall, only from what I know of Wallace and his friendship with Neil Robson."

"No; frankly, I don't anticipate much luck from it."

"And that's exactly why I came to you. I want to make you an offer. How much cold cash would it be worth to you to swing Wallace to the Mercury

Club—clean straightforward fashion, no strings attached?”

“How would you do it?”

“Personal influence. Clean work. Nothing disagreeable.”

Crandall swung back in his desk chair and thought for a moment. “Queer proposition you have to offer,” he said presently.

“It’s worth money to you, isn’t it?”

“Yes; I think it is. Provided there isn’t any crooked work and that no one knows of my part in it. The Mercury Club has got to have a team. I’m ashamed of our showing, and I’ve been a Mercury man nearly twenty years now. Mind you, Tallman, no word of my part in it, or you lose—well, one of your influential friends, if not a very close one.” Crandall could talk straight from the shoulder when he wished.

Tallman accepted the censure. “That’s all understood. I’ll be wanting your brokerage business some day, Mr. Crandall, so you can depend upon it that I’ll keep your name out of it.”

“Queer proposition,” Crandall repeated, “yet I don’t see that it breaks any laws. How much do you want for the job, Tallman?”

“A thousand dollars.”

“Too much.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Taken. On the understanding——”

“Yes; all that’s understood. When do you want the goods delivered?”

“Any time this summer. I’d like to have him running for us for the junior championships. But I’d be satisfied to see him running under the Mercury emblem by next indoor season.”

“Good enough! And cash on delivery, eh?”

“Yes; you bet!”

CHAPTER IV.

FACING A CRISIS.

FOR Wallace, the next two months were constant pendulum swings between delight and misery, each greater than he had ever known.

It all started from that first night when, on her invitation, he visited Sylvia Harkness at her home. On that night, before he went to see her, he called off

the dinner engagement he had accepted with Rex Tallman. For Wallace guessed, from what Neil Robson had said, that there might be some sinister connection between Tallman and the offer that Crandall had made to him.

It was impossible, however, for him to believe in any such duplicity on the part of Sylvia Harkness. On that night she did ask him the outcome of his visit to Crandall, on the ground that she took a personal interest in his success. When Wallace related it to her, he unconsciously let drop a hint of his suspicion against Tallman.

The girl made haste to assure him, and in all sincerity, that Tallman had nothing to do with it and that Crandall’s visit to their table in the restaurant had been of his own volition, so far as she knew. She convinced Wallace utterly when she praised him for his decision in the matter of changing clubs and assured him of her higher opinion of the Olympic Club in comparison with the Mercury outfit.

He left her that night in a state of high elation and engaged to go to the theater with her the first night he broke training.

Next day Wallace saw Robson at the club, and Robson asked him questions about his evening with Tallman. Wallace’s replies had mostly to do with Sylvia Harkness. Wallace resented, without saying anything, the rather obvious disapproval that came into Robson’s eyes when he spoke of the girl. Since Robson said nothing openly, however, Wallace had no chance to open up a defense.

Wallace did, though, silently decide to tell Robson nothing about the offer from the Mercury Club. He was sure that Robson would immediately connect the offer with Tallman and then with Miss Harkness, and Wallace did not want the girl to be thought about in that way by anybody.

So the matter was dropped from Wallace’s mind. So, Wallace thought, it was dropped from Robson’s mind.

The four-day grind of intensive training for the indoor championships kept them all busy, none of them with more application to training than Wallace. He was repaid for it. Dan Quirk entered him in the mile again with Neil Robson,

against a bigger and much faster field than appeared in the dual meet with the Mercury Club.

Wallace would have won that race and the championship easily, if he had been a more experienced runner. His native strength and endurance carried him into the lead throughout the third quarter. He was running easily, confidently, without effort and unchallenged, up to the last lap.

Then Robson crept up on him. This was no give-away race. Robson was of no mind to throw the championship as easily as he had surrendered, for good reason, in the dual meet. He simply ran shoulder to shoulder with Wallace; he saved himself much by taking Wallace's pace, by running close in on the sharp corners, while Wallace, not so expert at the corners, ran wide.

As they entered the straightaway, Captain Robson was off like a shot on his sprint. He took Wallace unaware and was two paces to the good before Wallace knew what had happened.

Wallace tried to pick him up, almost succeeded, would have succeeded in twenty yards more. Robson, however, had timed the sprint well and broke the worsted himself no more than a foot ahead of his teammate. Wallace finished fresh as a daisy.

Robson told him so in the dressing room after the race. "You had that race sewed up, Wally. Why didn't you go on out to your limit? I never could have caught you. You can beat me now any time you want to."

"I'll do it this summer, Robby," Wallace returned cheerfully.

Then a month of rest followed for the men between the indoor and the outdoor season. For Wallace it was highest tide of his life. He saw Miss Harkness as often as she would permit. He took her to lunch, to the movies, to the theater. He lived his days only for seeing her at night. During all that time he saw almost no one of his clubmates, never saw Tallman, thought only of his work and of Miss Harkness.

It soon brought him into unforeseen difficulties, however. He had saved some money even on his meager salary since he came to New York, for he had been

brought up to habits of thrift. In the excitement of taking Sylvia Harkness around New York, though, he forgot his lessons of thrift. Within a very short time his savings were gone, and he was in debt for his room rent. His landlady was patient at first, for she had a good opinion of him.

When two pay days went past and he gave her nothing, however, she began to solicit him for it. In this strait he went to Robson and asked for a loan of twenty dollars.

Robson gave it to him without hesitation, but asked: "What's the trouble, Wally?"

"I don't know. Money seems to go so fast."

"Miss Harkness?"

"Yes."

Robson looked thoughtful. "Please don't think I mean to be impertinent. I know nothing about her. But does she understand the difficulties you're getting into?"

Wallace sidestepped the question. "I'll go careful after this," he promised, cloaking his resentment against Robson's too personal inquiries.

Wallace meant to go careful. Miss Harkness, however, had come to expect things from him as a matter of course, and he had not the courage to refuse her.

He dared not go again to Robson to borrow and had no money with which to repay him. When he fell short of cash again, he went to two or three other members of the club. At last the word seemed to have been passed around that he had come to be a sponger who borrowed liberally and never repaid, and his fourth request for a loan was refused.

Now Wallace found himself indeed in a tight place. The call for spring training had gone out, but he was ashamed to go out to the club field, where he would meet the men to whom he owed money and whom he could not pay. It seemed impossible for him to break with Miss Harkness. He could find no fault with her. He could blame only himself for his difficulties. It was only when he was with her that he did not brood over his financial worries.

Robson at last came to see Wallace

where he worked and asked him why he had not shown up for training yet.

"Been too busy, Robby," Wallace returned with a feeble effort at cheerfulness.

"Yes; but we all expect you. There's none too much time to get into shape for the outdoor meet against the Mercury Club."

Wallace realized that he was at a crisis. He could offer Robson no excuse for his absence. He could not tell Robson that he was ashamed to meet the men whom he could not pay. In a flash he decided that he would take one last plunge to straighten himself out in his world.

"I'll be out to-morrow morning without fail, Robby," he promised.

Thus Wallace faced the crisis which he could no longer postpone. That night he looked up Rex Tallman, the only man he knew who had money enough to pay his scattering debts.

Tallman greeted him cordially. It was the first time they had met since that night in the restaurant. Wallace, in halting and embarrassed fashion, made known his request.

"Sure I can let you have a hundred for a little while, Wally!" Tallman said instantly. "It's worth it to get to know you again. Where have you been keeping yourself lately?"

Wallace did not reply to the direct question. "When must I pay you back?" he inquired.

"Oh, sometime. Whenever it's convenient. Sometime I'll need it, and then I'll come to you. What's the matter, old man? Aren't you making money enough to live on?"

"I'd have enough if I lived right," Wallace replied.

"It isn't that, Wally. It's just that you don't make enough. It's a shame the way they pay you. Why don't you look around and get a better job? What did Crandall say to you, anyway? You never told me. I thought he sounded as if he had something."

"Too many strings to his offer. I turned him down flat."

"Well, you'd better take serious stock of things," Tallman said, as he tossed over a check. "I don't need this right

away, so you needn't worry about it. But when I do need it, I'll need it."

"I have taken stock of things all right," Wallace returned. "I think I know what I've got to do to pull out of this hole. Thanks, Tallman."

"That's all right. I really could give you some good steers about getting along in this town."

"I guess there are opportunities enough. Only I hope you'll be a little patient with me on the return of this loan."

"Of course. And come to me again if you get caught short financially. I usually have a little loose cash lying around to help a man out with."

So, for an indefinite time at least, Wallace knew relief from his worries, and went back to his training with undivided application.

CHAPTER V.

A BIG SURPRISE.

THE more Tallman thought it over, after Wallace had left him, the less contented he was with what had seemed success to him, the less sure he was of the working out of his plan. Wallace had acted too independently with him. He had a way of concealing things that made Tallman doubt. What had Wallace meant, for example, by that statement of his that he had "taken stock of things?" There was a bare possibility that Wallace would not be quite the easy mark Tallman had thought he would be.

Too much was at stake now for Tallman to take any chances that Wallace would wriggle out of the net he had so skillfully set. Tallman decided that caution bade him draw the net a little tighter if anything. With this in view, he called up Sylvia Harkness and asked to see her.

She could not see him that night. She had an engagement with Wallace. Yes; she would have dinner with him the next night.

When she met him the next evening, Tallman realized that she was not looking as well as when he had seen her last.

"I'm rather glad you called me up, Rex. I haven't seen you in a long time."

"And you missed me?" he bantered.

"I thought you were pretty busy with our young friend Wallace."

"He's started training and can't see me so often," Sylvia replied. "He told me so last night."

"Nonsense. It can't hurt his training to see you around now and then. He's silly. He should know that himself."

She looked at him anxiously. "Then you really think he's stopped for some other reason?"

"No, no, no!" Tallman replied with certainty. "It's only a pose of his to let you see how important training is. He'll be falling all over himself to see you before the week is out. In fact, Sylvia, it would be a great favor to me if you kept after him just a little. I could make it worth your while—a present, anything you care to pick out, within reason." His voice had dropped now to a confidential whisper, for the waiter was standing over them, ready to take their order.

Miss Harkness looked sharply at Tallman for an instant and then gave her undivided attention to the menu. When they had ordered and the waiter had gone on his way, she asked carelessly:

"What is it you were saying, Rex, when the waiter stopped here?"

"Telling you how you could earn a fine present all for yourself."

"Oh, yes. How?" She didn't seem to be much interested.

Tallman was so sure of himself and of her, however, and so interested in his own affairs, that he took no notice of her lack of interest. "By not letting Wallace get away from you. By making him spend more money on you than he has so far."

"Spend more money? What do you mean?"

Tallman laughed. "Oh, yes; I know that for a girl like you, who is used to having rich fellows see her around, the little bit that Wallace can spend on you is nothing at all. Makes him out cheap as anything. But for him—though, never mind, Sylvia. Just make him spend money on you."

She was not looking at him. "I wonder if I have! I never thought of it in that light."

Tallman began to notice her unusual

attitude. "You wonder if you have—what?" he asked.

"I wonder if I have made him spend more money than he can afford."

"Well, I'll tell the world you have! How far do you figure twenty-two dollars a week goes, when a man has to pay room and board out of it?"

"And you want me to make him spend more money?"

"Yes. You're an adept at that, Sylvia. If you'll only use your ingenuity on Wallace and get him in a little deeper, you'll not only have the fun of——"

"What's all this for, Rex?" she asked abruptly.

"You're strange to-night, Sylvia. What's come over you?"

"I just want to know what all this is for. Why do you want to get Clyde Wallace in deep financially? You must have some reason for it. You see some way to make some money out of him yourself, or you would never offer me this present you've been talking about."

"What's wrong, Sylvia? You mean to say you aren't my friend any more?" Tallman asked in deepest perplexity, for now she was not at all the gay, pleasure-loving gold digger that he had known her to be.

"Yes; of course something is wrong. You couldn't understand it, Rex Tallman, but I've come to like Clyde Wallace far better than any of the rest of you. I didn't realize that I could."

"Oh, quit your kidding! You, Sylvia Harkness, who'd never look at a man unless he took you both ways to a theater in a taxi, and——"

"Well, it's the truth, nevertheless. I've changed suddenly, somehow. I never liked a man so much before. He's so different from all the rest of you—clean and honest and—oh, no matter! I never realized how much I liked him till last night, when he told me he couldn't see me any more. He said it was because of his training again. I didn't think that was the whole story. But I know now it was because I have been letting him spend too much money on me.

"I didn't realize," she went on, "that he was spending hardly any money on me. I've been used to too much, you see. I don't care whether he spends any more

on me. I like him well enough just for himself, and that is more than I can say of any of the rest of you men," she added.

Tallman scowled over that admission. At first, it was incredible. He couldn't believe that Sylvia Harkness, the most pronounced gold digger he knew, could turn unselfish and take such a liking for an uncouth stripling like Wallace, who couldn't even take her to the movies without saving for a week.

Unbelievable end to all his schemes! Tallman himself had ruined them in part by taking her too much for granted, by believing her still to be what she had always been—eager enough to get presents.

"You tell me, Rex Tallman, what it was you intended to do with him."

"I'd hardly be fool enough to do that now, Sylvia."

"No; I suppose not. I should have kept quiet a little longer and heard all about it and then told him. But you made me too angry. I know, of course, what you were up to. You were going to get him involved, owing you money, and then make him sell out a race on which you'd bet and so clear yourself. Wasn't that it?"

"Nothing more to say on the subject, Sylvia."

"How much does he owe you now?"

"Plenty."

"Will you tell me how much? I'll go to father and get the money for him and pay you back——"

"He owes me plenty. You just try that game out on a man like Wallace and see where you come out. No; try it if you want, Sylvia."

"You refuse to tell me how much——"

"I must refuse to say another word about it."

She was silent for a moment. "Well, no matter. I know now what the trouble is with him, and that means a lot to me. And I think I'll start out on the new road by paying for my own dinner here. Because I've eaten all I'm going to with you."

Before Tallman quite knew what she was about, she had put a dollar bill and some silver on the table and was walking away from him, toward the exit. Tall-

man could only stare after her in consternation and unbelief.

After she had gone beyond the possibility of returning, Tallman still sat leisurely and unabashed over the rest of his dinner. For the glimmering of a new plan had come to him, one which seemed more certain than his previous idea, one that made use of those very qualities in Wallace and Sylvia Harkness which, till now, had appeared to spell ruin for him.

For he realized now that Sylvia Harkness would be constantly watchful of him; and that, through her warning, Wallace would be more audacious and more independent than ever.

Well, he would play their own game and let them hang themselves. Give a man rope enough——

Tallman doubted now if he could force Wallace to enter Crandall's employ. He was pretty sure that he could not force Wallace to do it by calling the loan on him. He could make Wallace's name and face detested by the Olympics, however, so that they would kick him out of that highly honorable organization. If Wallace was out of the Olympics, he would naturally affiliate himself with the Mercury Club as the next best one. There were several ways out of the woods.

CHAPTER VI.

ODDS UNEVEN.

TALLMAN bided his time until a very few days before the Olympics' first outdoor dual meet—that against the small but hard fighting and none too reputable Marathon Club.

In that interim, Tallman watched things carefully. He knew that Sylvia Harkness had made her peace with Wallace and was going about with him constantly in preference to all her old admirers, who offered costlier entertainment in vain. He knew that Sylvia had entered into a sort of affiliation with the Olympics as a whole, because she was so often out at the track in the warm spring evenings, to see Wallace work-out. He knew that Neil Robson had become acquainted with her and that Neil thoroughly approved of her.

Once or twice Tallman went out to the Olympics' track. Robson, as usual, was

polite to him, but always aloof. Sylvia was constantly on her guard against him. Wallace was friendly, but unembarrassed. Within a month Wallace had paid him back fifteen dollars of the hundred-dollar loan. He had forced this amount on Tallman, even though Tallman had told him to keep it.

Wallace, by this time, had come to be a fixture as the club's best miler. He could touch four twenty any day he was sent the distance. Dan Quirk trusted him to take the mile as well as Neil Robson could do it and had trained Robson down to fill a bad hole in the ranks of half milers. In the half, Robson consistently was doing around one fifty-seven.

Entries against the Marathon Club went in. Dan Quirk could pretty safely count on Wallace to win the mile. He would be pitted there against a sandy-haired little Dane, whose best clocked efforts were around twenty-two. No scout could find reason to believe that the little Dane could beat that mark.

On the other hand, Robson, in the half, had to run against the junior champion of the previous year and would have to do a little better than fifty-seven to take his event. For Wallace, the Marathon meet looked easy. Robson, on the other hand, would have to give out everything he had, to come through a winner in the half mile.

Wallace, coming from the office to his room the night before the meet, found a letter from Rex Tallman. It read:

I must ask you to be so good as to come to my apartment between eight and nine to-night. It is most important. I am relying on you.

To some extent, it was no more than Wallace had expected after what Sylvia Harkness had told him about Tallman. Having been forewarned, he knew how to look out for himself. In the circumstances he could not well refuse to do Rex Tallman's bidding. He decided, however, to say nothing to Sylvia about it; it would make better telling when it was over.

So, very soon after eight, Wallace went to Tallman's flat. Tallman had guests—two men of his own apparent station in life, whom Wallace had never seen be-

fore. From the hasty introductions, Wallace caught their names to be Miller and Josselyn. The introductions, however, were the other way. Wallace heard himself presented to them, with great gusto, as the coming mile champion, and as such he was enthusiastically received.

After talking for some time of athletics in general, Tallman suddenly remarked: "I must ask you to let me have my money back to-night, Wallace. I need it to-morrow."

That was what Wallace expected. "Sorry," he returned, "but I haven't it here. I can let you have five on account. If you could have given me a little more notice, I could have managed it all, I think. Anyway, you said there was no hurry about repayment."

Tallman's reception of that was not at all what Wallace had forecast. Instead of making more insistent demands, he burst out with: "There, fellows, you see what sort of a man he is! I let him have money to spend on that little gold digger Sylvia Harkness. And he not only takes my girl away from me, but my money, too; and when I need it——"

One of the men interrupted. "He'd better lay off Sylvia Harkness if he knows when he's wise. She's the very worst little——"

Tallman broke in: "Yes; and then some. Why, did I ever tell you——" Tallman began an amazing story.

Wallace, standing there in sudden blazing wrath, heard all he could stand of it. Then he took two swift steps toward Tallman. "Lay off that, Tallman! Stop it!"

"Not for you, Wallace. I'll tell my story through. This is my flat, after all. I'll do as I like here." He proceeded with his story, but not for more than a dozen words.

Wallace could not listen to it. He saw red, lost all control of himself, forgot who or where he was. He launched himself full at Tallman, straight for the throat as certainly as a furious dog would have leaped at it, and choked him into a gasping silence.

The two other men set upon Wallace from behind, to save Tallman. Wallace flung them off and, in doing so, had to release Tallman for an instant. Tallman

was on his feet by this time, and all three men joined forces against Wallace. Though Tallman was no match for him, it soon appeared that his two friends were no mean athletes.

Wallace could not handle all three. While his main objective was still Tallman, he took some cruel punishment from the two others, until he was forced in self-defense to turn against his abler assailants.

Tallman slipped to the telephone, but Wallace was unaware of it. It was a battle royal—Wallace, strong and lithe and trained to the minute, against the two huskies Tallman had brought in for the purpose.

Human endurance could not long stand up against such opposition as Wallace had. Little by little he was cornered and beaten down. Then, when at last he stretched his length on the floor because of sheer dizziness, the door opened and a policeman entered.

"I want this man arrested for malicious assault," Tallman said, pointing to the still struggling Wallace. "There are witnesses that he attacked me——"

Much more of the same thing followed, which Wallace could scarcely hear through the pounding in his ears.

That visit to Tallman ended with Wallace being marched away by the officer, with Tallman and his friends trailing along to enter complaint.

Wallace was still in too great mental confusion to know clearly what it was all about. He answered the questions which the desk lieutenant put to him, but it was as if another man were answering. He heard the charges which Tallman and his friends made, tried in vain to explain them away.

The lieutenant silenced him, however, saying that he must answer the charge formally in the police court the next morning. There was some talk of bail. Wallace, however, had not money enough to put up a proper bond. He was led away to a sleepless night in the station house, dreading more than anything else the publicity of the police-court trial next morning, fearing that Sylvia Harkness would hear of it.

That was his preparation for the mile run on the following day.

CHAPTER VII.

HANDICAPPED BY ACCIDENT.

THE afternoon of the Olympic-Marathon Meet could not have been more propitious so far as weather was concerned. The late-June sun glistened golden on the waters of the sound and beamed with lazy warmth upon the grand stand and the springy turf of the inclosure.

Silk-badged officials were bustling about to get the meet under way. Well-tanned and well-trained athletes were jogging about to stretch their muscles against the trials to come. The grand stand was a chattering riot of gay colors, while the band kept the crowd in good temper by stirring music.

Into all this gayety, Wallace dragged himself with numb legs and a more numb heart.

To him, the previous night was all a bad dream, a nightmare of which the mile race was to be the climax. He knew that he was sick and utterly fatigued, body and soul. Wrath at Tallman; a growing realization that it was all some sort of plot against himself; fear and shame lest Sylvia Harkness and his teammates learn about his night's lodging in the police station—all these things, added to the discomforts of the station itself with its drunken, riotous occupants, had left him completely without sleep.

Then came that which was even worse—his appearance in court. For he feared above all things lest his escape be published. Rex Tallman appeared to make his complaint, but, at the very moment of his hearing, decided to withdraw it. So Wallace had been released, at about eleven o'clock, with a suspended sentence and nothing worse than that. A half promise, half threat to Tallman bound him to secrecy. The newspaper men agreed not to print the story.

There was no time, however, for Wallace to recuperate his strength for the race by snatching sleep. He could do no more than get a hasty lunch and catch the train out to the athletic field. There, every one he met commented on his state—physically and nervously exhausted. He could make no other excuse for it, however, save the simple plea of being

worried about the race. He couldn't withdraw from it. There was no better miler than himself, except Robson; and Robson was needed most in the half mile. There was nothing to do, but go on and run it as best he could.

After all, it was nothing more than a race. He would have plenty of chances to retrieve himself before the season was over. The club would have to take him as he was—winner or loser. He might last through the first quarter, possibly through the first half, but certainly no more than that.

He was too dead of mind and body to do more than look forward with blissful expectancy to the time when he could roll into bed and forget it all in one long sleep. This race he was starting mattered not at all to him, because there was no human chance of his winning it.

His path across the inclosure on his way to the starting of the mile led him face to face with Martin Crandall, who was officiating as one of the judges. Wallace did not recognize him until Crandall spoke.

"Hello, there, youngster! Haven't seen you lately."

"I didn't know you wanted to," Wallace spoke the first words that came to his lips.

"My offer is still open."

"I gave you my answer on that."

"If ever you want to change——"

"I don't think I ever shall."

"All right, then. I admire a man who knows his mind and sticks to it. But say, you aren't looking any too well! What's the trouble?" Crandall's voice had changed from its half-bantering tone to one of real solicitude.

"Nothing much. Nervous over the race, I guess."

"Nonsense! You've got two or three seconds over Sven Horthing the best day he ever ran. Forget it."

Their conversation was interrupted by the call for the milers. Wallace went over to the post and dimly heard his name called with the five other starters. Through his sleepy brain it dawned upon him, too, that he had been assigned to the inside position. Well, it didn't much matter whether he had inside or outside, for all he could run this race through.

He went to his mark, to hear the official go through the ritual of last instructions to the runners. Wallace knew them by heart. Then, suddenly, as he was waiting for the starting signal, he was aware that Neil Robson was at his side, tugging at his arm. He looked around at Robson in a daze.

"Wally, look here! Rex Tallman says you have sold this race. Is it true?"

"I—— What—— No! I don't know what you mean."

The starter shouted something at Robson, and Robson commanded him to hold the race for a time. Without awaiting the official's answer, Robson tugged Wallace off the track, a few paces away, out of earshot of the rest.

In the meantime, the starter was yelling: "The start will not be postponed! If Wallace is not going to run—the rest of you go to your marks."

Robson was whispering to Wallace. "Sounds queer. Sounds reasonable, Wally. And you look so——"

"What are you taking about?" Wallace couldn't understand it yet.

"Rex Tallman boasted to Sylvia Harkness that you had sold this race, that he had bet two hundred on Sven Horthing to win——"

The starter's measured cries broke in: "On your marks—— Get set!"

Even as they waited for the pistol to send the milers away, Wallace began to comprehend a little of what Robson was talking about. "He lied to Sylvia——"

"You've got to prove your own innocence, Wally!" Robson cried. "If you win this race, you've proved it. You've got to prove it! If you lose this race—there, they're off. Jump into it."

The pistol barked. The five men lined up on the track were away on their fight to the first corner. Wallace looked at them in amazement for the space of a watch tick and then, covering in two strides the turf that intervened between where he stood and the cinder path, was out after them.

Sven Horthing, the little light-haired Dane, was the dangerous man, and already he was halfway to the first corner. A tumult of protest from the grand stand arose at the uneven start, but the officials would not recall the runners.

Wallace ran at first with no knowledge of the race, or even of the fact that he was running. It was all unconscious effort, exactly as if Robson had pushed him into water to make him swim. In his mind there was nothing but the chorus of Robson's words to him: "You've got to prove it!"

Usually a distance runner runs to some rhythmic repetition of words or sounds in the back of his mind. It seems to help him time his pace, seems to keep his mind off the physical grilling of the race.

Now these words became Wallace's subconscious chorus. "You've got to prove it; you've got to prove it." To every beat of the rhythm he took a pace ahead. There was but one way to prove it—to win.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH ALL HE HAD.

THE little Dane, off to an unusually fast start for him, was halfway down the first curve of the track before Wallace, starting under an unofficial handicap, had reached the first corner. Wallace managed to add a couple of inches to his stride. Even that, however, availed him nothing.

Little Horthing was out to do things this time. He gained on Wallace—and gained and gained. In Wallace there was no speed, nothing but that dogged pounding to the chorus: "You've got to prove it; you've got to prove it."

Things were this way for the first half mile. It was a half such as Horthing had never run before. Robson was at the post as Wallace passed it, fully twenty yards behind the leader, with two laps to go. Robson dared the officials' censure by running along a few paces beside Wallace and shouting:

"Two thirteen for the half. Poor for you. Go up on him! You've got to prove it. You've got to prove it!"

Wallace's mind grasped one more idea from Robson's shout. The little Dane had run a faster first half than ever he had run before. Did that mean anything? Ahead of him, well past the corner, Wallace saw Horthing turn his head and look back. Did that mean the little Dane was tiring fast and wanted to rest through the third lap?

Down the straightaway leading toward the post, Wallace knew that he passed two men, without being able to tell who they were. Robson was at the post again and again ran beside him for a few paces.

"You're gaining on him. You've gained five yards. Now go after him! He's blowing up!"

Yet it all meant nothing to Wallace. He could scarcely distinguish the words, could realize nothing but that relentless pounding, that ceaseless forcing of numb legs one past the other somehow.

Somewhere, somehow, he passed another man, and, ages later, still another. He tried to count them—four men he had passed. That left Horthing to be passed. Only Horthing, but where was he? Wallace could not see him. Still he went on. There were two more corners to pass, he knew, and then an interminable straightaway.

Then Horthing's slim body loomed up almost in front of him, not five yards away. Wallace came upon it suddenly, as if Horthing were standing still, just as he turned a corner. He went after that figure, chased it down to the next corner—chased it as if he were flying and yet somehow as if he were standing in one spot, for there was no feeling in his body.

The last corner came to him, then the straightaway. Habit, or something, took possession of Wallace. He saw the Dane's slim body beside him, knew he had passed it, and felt the worsted break across his chest.

The next thing that Wallace knew he was lying on a bath robe in the blaze of the sun, with a sweater under his head for a pillow. Neil Robson and one or two others stood around.

Wallace tried to talk. "You've got to prove it," were the first words he said. Unconscious as they were, they seemed to bring him back to the land of reality.

"You certainly proved it, Wally!" Robson smiled at him. "Feel better now?"

Wallace was rapidly coming around. "No—hold on a minute! I want to know the truth. Did Rex Tallman say I had sold that race? Or was it just a trick of

yours to get me to win it?" he asked haltingly.

"The truth, Wally."

"How did you know?"

"He boasted about it to Sylvia Harkness, just before the race started, to prove to her that you were a crook. I suppose he wanted to win her back for himself. She came and told me, so that, in case I believed it, I could take you out of the race and run myself."

"Then she believed it?"

"She didn't know whether it was true or not. She simply didn't want to take any chances on keeping her knowledge a secret. But she can't be in doubt any more, Wally, not after the race you put up. So rest easy!"

Wallace made no response. While he regained his strength, he did a lot of thinking. Fruitless thinking it proved to be. He was trying to find a hidden meaning to all this labyrinth of Tallman's unexpected, unreasonable actions.

Next Martin Crandall came up to him, and with Crandall was the coach of the Marathon team.

Crandall looked very grave. "How's the boy now?" he asked Wallace.

Wallace sat up to speak to him. "All right in a minute, I guess."

"Hope so. Fine race, considering a lot of things I'd like to know about. Strong enough to talk, Wallace?"

"Sure! What about?"

Wallace noticed now that the Marathon coach was interested in this.

Crandall said to the coach: "Tell him your story, Mac."

The coach addressed Wallace. "It's about Sven Horthing. He ran a fool race, ran his first half too fast and blew up. I called him down aplenty for running such a race. He said that Rex Tallman had told him that was the race to run. I bawled him out for listening to Tallman.

"Then he confessed," the coach went on, "that Tallman had bet two hundred on him to win, and had told him that he had done something to you last night that would surely put you out of business, so that the best way to win to-day would be to go out fast from the gun and run you off your feet. That's the excuse Horthing gave me for running a

first half so fast. And I've got to admit it sounded reasonable. Then, I was telling Mart Crandall here about it, and Martin fetches me over to you, and——"

At this point Martin Crandall broke in, as if he could contain himself no longer. "What did Rex Tallman do to you, Wallace?" he asked.

Wallace hesitated. "Does it matter, so long as I won the race?"

"That means you're not telling?" Crandall inquired.

"Yes," Wallace replied.

Crandall, thinking hard, was baffled for a moment. Then he turned to Neil Robson. "You tell me this, Robson. If Wallace hadn't won this race to-day, you'd have believed Tallman's tale that he had sold it, wouldn't you? And you see you couldn't have forced Wallace to make any defense of himself, because he wouldn't defend himself to me. So—what would you have done about it?"

"Why, fired him off the club, I suppose. We would have done that. We couldn't have crooks running——"

"And so—Wallace would have been fired from the Olympics," Crandall said, talking now, it seemed, mostly to himself. "If Miss Harkness hadn't had the nerve and the presence of mind, the courage to tell—— Well, that teaches me a lesson. Thanks, boys. Don't ask any questions, and don't think any."

He left them for a moment and walked off a few paces by himself. While they looked after him, wondering, he turned back to them.

"Don't ask any questions, and don't think any," he repeated. "It may be that I am letting my enthusiasm run away with me—a second time—but this time I'll take a chance. Wallace—— No; after all, I'm not making you this offer as any sort of reward, nor because it salves my conscience. I'm making you the offer because I've got more respect for you than for any other young man I know, and I want in my business young men I can respect. Will you come to me, take the job I offered you before, but at forty a week, and be sure that I'll raise you just as soon as——"

Wallace interrupted. "But I thought I had made it plain to you, Mr. Crandall, that I would not leave the club——"

Crandall interrupted in his turn. "Of course I know that. There's no question of it; you're to stick with the Olympic Club. I want you, as a man, in my organization, just because of what I've seen here to-day. And if forty dollars a week, with advancement——"

"You mean it?" Wallace exclaimed incredulously.

"Of course I mean it! Will you accept?"

"Yes; I accept."

Crandall laughed with delight and clasped Wallace's hand. "Then run along and tell Miss Harkness about it," he said, "and report to me on Monday morning."

Which, of course, Wallace was not loath to do.

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole. The editors will appreciate any letter you may send.

Far Too Much

AT a club one evening a famous judge was introduced to a well-known business man who is given to boasting of the large income he enjoys.

With the apparent purpose of impressing those about him, the business man remarked that, as nearly as he could tell, his income exceeded one hundred thousand dollars.

"I must make as much as that," he said. "Why, it costs me eighty thousand dollars a year to live."

"Dear me," remarked the judge blandly. "Really, that's too much! I wouldn't pay it—it isn't worth it!"

Couldn't Believe Him

BBROWN and Jones agreed to settle their disputes by a fight, and it was understood that whoever wanted to stop should say "Enough."

Brown got Jones down and was hammering him unmercifully, when Jones called out several times, "Enough!"

As Brown paid no attention, but kept

on administering punishment, a bystander said, "Why don't you let him up? Don't you hear him say he's had enough?"

"I do," said Brown, "but he's such a liar, you can't believe him."

His Only Trouble

THE manager of a business house was interviewing a score of applicants for the position of night watchman. He was very hard to please, and always found something out of the way with each man.

One had red hair, which the manager couldn't stand; another squinted; one was too thin; another too fat; one too short; and, again, another too tall.

Samuel Smithers, waiting his turn, heard the several conversations and vowed that when his turn came he would be prepared for everything.

At last his turn came, and, surprising to relate, Sam seemed O. K. all the way through the stream of questions. He had the right complexion, not too short or too thin, and at last the manager came to the last question.

"Are you sure that you're in good health?"

"Quite sure, sir; that is, I have only one complaint."

"What is that?" queried the manager, pricking up his ears.

"Sleeplessness, sir," came the prompt reply.

Her Request

DINING with some friends one night, a celebrated pianist was persuaded at the end of the meal to play a rhapsody.

Pale with emotion, a young woman, who had been fluttering for some time on her chair, suddenly got up and said: "How divinely you play; but may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Is a quaver played quickly?"

"Good heavens, I should say it is."

"And a semiquaver?"

"Much more so."

"Oh," said the girl beseechingly, "do play one for me!"



The Rider of the Ranges

By
George Goodchild—
AUTHOR OF "COLORADO JIM" ETC.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

TRAMPLED IN THE SNOW.



WHILE the fight was raging between Tex and Red Ryan, Sylvia at the shack was fulfilling her vigil in a state of "nerves." Again and again there came the presentiment that great trouble was in the making, and this was surely backed by the facts. Up there where Ryan lived it was lonely. If anything happened to Tex there probably would be no trace left. Ryan would see to that. Sylvia had cause to hate the scoundrel almost as much as Tex, and she feared that with all Tex's courage and strength he would be no match for such a gang as Ryan's, who were already so deeply involved in crime that another murder would scarcely count.

The hours passed, and she walked up and down the small room imagining horrible things. All the while the baby slept peacefully. How quick Tex had been in rushing to the Indian girl's rescue! Was it merely his chivalrous spirit that prompted him, or— She knew it was a horrid reflection, and yet she could not help making it.

Sleep! It was as far away as the pole. Sylvia never had felt so wide awake in

her life, and her nerves seemed to be out of control. Tex had said he hoped to be home by dawn, but dawn was hours away yet. In the circumstances she was a little surprised to find herself so distraught. If the worst happened she would be free.

Sylvia shuddered as she reflected how hideous it would be to gain liberty that way. Even if she had not been happy, even if there had been no love, Tex was admirable in his own way. He never considered himself—she had to admit that. Even for Pocahontas he would have risked his neck and thought nothing of it. There was no use trying to belittle him when that very hut was a proof of his indomitable will and tremendous energy.

These changes in Sylvia's attitude were almost subconscious. They sprang from her heart rather than from her mind. To herself she would have been reluctant to admit that in spite of everything her admiration continued to grow and was fast developing into something deeper. Opposed to it was the vision of Morning Star as she looked whenever Tex was near her. She wished that she could read the other woman's soul more clearly. Were those smiles but tokens of regard for her white friend? Was that

ecstatic look as innocent as Tex would doubtless have her believe?

The intense quiet of the place was conducive to thought. Her mind went back to the day when first she had seen him at Roaring Falls, to the rodeo and his marvelous feats. Then she had held life lightly enough. It had been great fun to encourage him in his rough courtship. If she could have foreseen it would come to this!

When morning eventually dawned it seemed to Sylvia that a year had passed since Tex went riding out into the night. Apprehensive, she went to the door and looked up the trail, but there was no sign of Tex. The next half hour was an eternity to her. She fought against the hideous natural conclusion. She could not imagine Tex being worsted in any encounter and yet—

The child awoke and cried for food. She found some canned milk and, diluting it with warm water, fed him until he crooned with satisfaction. Thereafter he lay back and played with a feather.

To sit there and wait longer was impossible. The desire to know the truth became overwhelming. In the corner was Tex's rifle. Sylvia got it and finding the magazine empty, she loaded it. A few minutes later she went out into the cold air.

The hoofs of Pocahontas were clear enough, and she followed them wherever they led. All the while her eyes searched the near horizon, only to see the eternal pines and snow and jumbled rocks. From the distance between the hoof marks it was evident that Tex had put up an amazing speed in the circumstances, and that made his absence all the more significant.

She dreaded to run across him in the snow, wounded or even worse. But Ryan would not act that way. No; the snow would yield nothing. The tracks went on and on over hill and hollow, and with set face she continued. Whatever awaited her yonder she was determined to face it.

At length Sylvia reached the top of the cliff where Tex had left Pocahontas, but the horse was not there now. Looking over she saw the mill—a charred wreck with smoke still ascending from the

débris. What had happened there? Where was Tex? Her heart quailed at the grim significance of the heap of smoldering timber. She retreated from the dizzy precipice and covered her eyes with her hand.

After a few minutes' rest she decided to walk back and approach the wreckage by the goat track. She tottered across the snow, on the verge of collapse, but she had not made more than a quarter of a mile when a horseman emerged from a clump of trees. She uttered a low cry as she recognized Pocahontas. But the man who rode him was not Tex. It was Ryan.

The horse was in a mad frenzy, and Ryan was laying about it with a stick. He was hatless, and Sylvia thought his face was a trifle different. Then he saw her and succeeded in forcing the horse toward her. As he approached she saw that his changed look was due to horrid wounds and swellings—the marks of Tex's fists. He pulled up the horse close to her and grinned savagely.

"So you're back, eh?"

All Sylvia's attention, however, was taken by Pocahontas. The horse's mouth was bleeding where the bit had been pulled mercilessly, and the flanks were raw.

"You—you beast!" she cried.

She suddenly remembered the rifle and made a swift movement to unslung it, but Ryan anticipated her and clutched the barrel. It was then that Pocahontas took a hand. She suddenly sprang forward, almost dismounting her unwelcome rider. The rifle was left in Sylvia's hands, and Ryan began to belabor the horse again as she went flying madly forward.

Sylvia watched her making for the edge of the cliff and wondered what would happen when she reached it. Ryan, finding himself unable to check the animal, fell sideways. The horse went on riderless for fifty yards and then, to Sylvia's amazement, wheeled and rushed at her late torturer. She drove him close to the edge of the precipice and then, felling him, trampled on him with shrill cries of rage. Only when he lay still in the snow did she desist and walk away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HIS LAST SHOT.

HORRIFIED by the sight, Sylvia ran forward and reached Ryan's side. His eyes were closed, but she saw that he was still breathing. Brute as he was she could not leave him thus. Compassion overrode her repulsion. A little later he opened his eyes and groaned.

"Are you—badly hurt?" she asked.

The bloodshot eyes shortened their focus and rested on her pale face. "You!" There was a snarl in the expression.

"Can't I do—anything?"

"I'm done!" he muttered. "That horse! So you came back to him—you little fool!"

"Where—where is he?" she queried.

"Dead. And serves—serves him right."

"Dead!" she gasped. "No—no; you are not telling me the truth. You couldn't kill Tex—you couldn't."

He laughed and half choked. "If—I couldn't—fire could," he said after a pause. "He mauled me, but some of my pals got him—him and the girl. Guess they're cinders by now."

Sylvia closed her eyes in her anguish, and Ryan grinned even in his dying hour. He was not the kind of man to repent at the last moment. Not quite sure about Tex, he meant to damn him with his last breath, in case Tex still lived.

"You're—well out of a bad bargain," he wheezed. "He was a kind of husband before—before he met you."

Her pained eyes regarded him in horror.

"That half-caste kid—whose do you think he is? You must be blind."

"What—what are you saying?" she cried.

"You may as well know now. It was his."

"No, no!"

"You can take it from me. I got it—from its mother."

Having got home this last shot, he groaned and closed his eyes. A great shudder shook his frame, and then he lay perfectly still. Half blind Sylvia rose to her feet and tottered backward. She came within a few inches of the edge of

the precipice before she was aware of it. Then her eyes saw the dizzy depth below and the black, rushing river in the gorge. She went to step forward, but dislodged a mass of snow. She had a sensation of falling and knew no more until she found herself in icy-cold water, struggling for breath.

Like a cork she was swept down the gorge. She tried to swim against the swift current, but found her efforts of no avail. A few minutes of this terrible cold and all would be over. She saw before her a black rock projecting from the water. With the frenzy of despair she clutched at it and caught it with her fingers. Her grip held and a multitude of thoughts rushed through her brain.

Below her were the falls—the veritable edge of beyond. Once her fingers let go, the end was inevitable. She felt them grow colder and colder. Little by little all feeling was departing. She looked up at the wall above and to her amazement saw a familiar figure there.

"Tex!" she screamed.

The big form ran along the edge of the cliff and then performed a marvelous feat. She saw the arms go up and a second later a body was rushing downward. Paralyzed she saw it enter the water at a spot that was fringed with murderous rocks. An eternity seemed to pass before she saw a head appear and then a pair of arms.

"Hold on!"

The thundering voice was fuel to her dying will. The slipping hands received new strength. She saw him coming toward her at a tremendous rate, and then he was there, clinging onto the same rock, one arm round it and the other round her body.

"Tex! Tex!" she almost sobbed.

"Lie limp. Rest for a moment," he whispered. "This is sure a hell of a place."

He permitted her no more than twenty seconds to recover a little strength, and then began the fierce fight with the waters. How long it lasted she did not know. All that mattered was that he had one hand under her arm, and that the shore slowly got nearer. Their oblique course brought them almost to the edge of the falls, but somehow fear

had gone. Tex was there—Tex the fearless and indomitable.

The incident that had preceded this amazing fight was temporarily forgotten. Both Ryan and Morning Star were dissipated into thin air. The dominant sensation was of being borne through the valley of the shadow by Tex. When at last she saw the land within a few yards, and Tex waist-deep in water, dragging her toward it, consciousness left her.

The ordeal over, Tex collapsed beside her. There was a deep stain on his coat by his right breast and another on the sleeve of his left arm. Amazingly strong as he was, that night had taken its toll, and the river had sapped what was left in him. When Sylvia opened her eyes and shivered, she found him with his head in his arms, lying very still.

"Tex!" she cried.

The eyes opened and surveyed her dreamily. He tried to say something, but his lips would not function. Then she saw the stains and shuddered.

To move him was impossible, and it was evident that he was not capable of moving himself. On both of them the water was being formed into thin ice. Things were at a dangerous pass. Some distance away the remains of the mill were still smoldering. If she could only get him there!

She tried and failed and then sat down and wept. A little later there was a slight noise near her. She looked up and saw Morning Star running across the snow. Her eyes flashed as Ryan's last assertion was revived in her memory. But it was no time for hate with Tex in his present condition.

"Quick! Help me to move him toward the mill," she said.

Morning Star at once understood her motive. The two hauled on Tex's arms and dragged him yard by yard toward the warmer spot.

"Horse up there," whispered Morning Star. "I catch him. You stay here, and I bring him along?"

Sylvia nodded, and the girl ran off like a hare. In less than a quarter of an hour she was back again with Pocahontas.

"We can never get him on the horse," said Sylvia.

"Yes, yes!"

The feat was accomplished by an astonishing exhibition of feminine strength on the part of Morning Star. The whole thing was a revelation to Sylvia, who had been brought up to believe that all women were necessarily soft and muscleless. Morning Star was certainly the exception. Life had not been kind to her. Like Tex she was a child of the wilderness, and to toil was second nature.

"Let—let us go," said Sylvia. "We can get to the shack now."

The bedraggled procession started, and during the weary journey no word passed between the two women. Then Morning Star raised the question that was troubling her.

"You got my baby?"

Sylvia started and replied without turning her head: "He is safe, in our shack."

"Tex find him—yes?"

Sylvia nodded, and silence followed. With her brain refreshed by the action of walking, the tragedy of her position became more and more apparent. Knowing the dead Ryan to be the most infamous of liars, she wanted to have his assertion indorsed by Morning Star herself, but her pride was too great to put that question—yet.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN A NEW RÔLE.

ARRIVED at the shack Tex had strength enough to put himself to bed. Sylvia handed Morning Star her infant and then, having stabled the horse, turned her attention to the wounded man. Knowing nothing about illness she was at a loss where to begin. Short of food, and lacking bandages, it was indeed a terrible situation, for Tex was obviously in a bad way. She crept up to the bed and gazed down at him.

He opened his eyes. "Oh, it's you!"

"Yes; I was wondering what I should do."

"Don't you worry. I'll pull through."

"Shall I bathe those horrid wounds?"

"Maybe it would help."

Sylvia warmed some water and tore up a nightdress to fashion into bandages. When she exposed the wounds she shud-

dered at the ghastly holes the soft bullets had made. He looked at her as she set about her task.

"It ain't the sort of work you ought to do," Tex muttered.

"Who—who should do it but me?"

"Where's that girl?"

"You mean—Morning Star?"

"Sure! She's used to nursing, I guess. All these Indian women are steel-plated when——"

"You—you want her to come—here?"

"It would save you a deal of trouble."

"I—prefer to be without her—help," she said coldly.

"All right, but I'm sure going to be a darned encumbrance for a few days."

"Did—did Ryan do this?"

"Nope. I had him where I wanted him when three of his coyotes turned up unexpectedly. They let fly at me. If it hadn't been for Morning Star I'd be carrying more than this. She got to work good and proper with a six-shooter, and——"

He stopped and winced as she dabbed the wound in his chest a little too hard.

"I'm sorry!" she cried. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not much! But the bullet is still in there."

Sylvia had quite overlooked this possibility and wondered what was to be done in the circumstances. Tex was quick to appraise her. He pointed to a thin-bladed knife on the table.

"Maybe you can rake it out with that."

The girl shuddered as she gazed at the keen blade. Bathing a wound was one thing and performing horrid operations quite another.

Tex observed her reluctance. "Never mind!" he said. "It can stay for a bit."

"You are only saying that because—because——"

He moved slightly and tried to hide the acute pain that burned his breast, but she knew it all the same by the tightening of his mouth and the quick flutter of his eyelids.

"Why—why isn't there a doctor?" she cried.

"Wouldn't make much of a living in these parts. I'll have to get this lump of lead shifted. Give me the knife."

She hesitated and then gave it to him with a hand that trembled like a leaf in the wind. But he found the blade too wide and thin and shook his head.

"No good! There's a jackknife in my pocket, full of gadgets. Over there!"

Sylvia went to his coat and produced the article in question. Tex opened the spike which he used for taking stones out of the hoofs of his horse, but he was too weak to go on and lay there looking a trifle dejected at his helplessness.

"Queer, how a couple of holes can get a fellow down!" he mused. "I feel like two cents' worth of milk. Say, you'd better run along to that girl's camp. She'll hook this thing out in two shakes, then you can bandage me up."

Sylvia hesitated and then moved toward the door. But before she reached it her mind revolted at the idea of calling in Morning Star to do what was undoubtedly her own work. In addition there was another reason, a deeper one. She came back.

"Give me the knife!"

"Eh?"

"I'll—try."

Sylvia took it from his fingers and then fought against the faintness that threatened to overwhelm her. What followed was horrid. She knew she was clumsy, that she was hurting him dreadfully, but his set lips never moved, saving once to give her encouragement.

"You're reaching it. Stick to it!"

At last the misshapen piece of lead came out, accompanied by a great sigh from the victim. Blinded with tears of tremendous relief Sylvia sank back in the chair. Then the faintness passed. Feeling stronger than ever she went to him and finished the job, bandaging him with pieces of her own nightdress.

"Good!" Tex murmured.

"Are you—easier?"

"Sure! I guess I'll be able to sleep a bit now."

"Can you eat anything?"

"Not now," he replied drowsily. "Sleep's the thing to pull a fellow round."

Sylvia nodded and cleared up the place. Before she had finished Tex dropped off into a deep sleep. Realizing that he would be laid up for some time, she took some fish lines and went down

to the river to set them. On either side of the stream there was a wide rim of ice. Soon there would be no water running. She left them and made to go back to Tex.

Before she reached the shack Morning Star came running toward her. Her dark eyes were full of inquiry, and when no information was volunteered by Sylvia she put her question:

"How is white man?"

"Asleep," replied Sylvia tersely.

"Have bullet in chest. Must get bullet out."

"It is out."

"You get um out?"

"Of course!"

Morning Star's eyes opened wide. It was evident that she had expected to be asked to lend her services, and it looked as if she was disappointed as well as surprised.

"He live now. He very strong," she said.

"I hope so."

"Maybe you like Morning Star come and help?"

"No; thank you."

"Then I catch some fish for you?"

"I have already laid some lines."

The cold rejoinders fell like a lash on the fine shoulders of the girl. But she had inherited an ancient pride and drew herself up displaying as much hauteur as Sylvia herself.

"I come when you want me."

"Thank you!"

They parted, and Sylvia entered the shack. She stole into Tex's bedroom and found him still asleep. As she looked at him she recalled the very recent adventure. Was it possible to do other than admire him—almost love him? The dive from the cliff was the most wonderful feat she had ever heard of. The slightest error of judgment would have smashed his fine body to pulp. A little less depth of water would have had the same result. Yet he had not hesitated for a moment. In that great act of heroism her heart had called out to her as never before. And the cruel, ironical part of it was that this admiration had come so soon after her painful disillusionment.

The other fly in the ointment was the

knowledge that Tex would have done the same thing for Morning Star, or any other man, woman, or child. He was made that way and simply could not help himself. Morning Star! There was the torturing iron. It was impossible to think of her or to see her without remembering what Ryan had said.

Sylvia did not want to believe it, and yet she thought she read the verification in the dark eyes of the girl. It was chiefly because she dreaded to have this hateful assertion corroborated that she recoiled from putting the vital question. That and her pride were creating a little hell for her to dwell in.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MAINTAINING THE BARRIER.

LATER, Sylvia got some solace in doctoring poor Pocahontas. She found the horse ointment which Tex kept and applied it to the animal's wounds. She was well repaid for the service, for Pocahontas had ways of expression that were only a little less eloquent than speech.

"No wonder he loves you," she murmured. "No one ever loved me like that, Poc."

The horse seemed to look at her reprovingly.

"It might have been," she mused. "Yes; it might have been but for the past."

She stayed there for some time seeking to find some outlet for her mixed emotions and succeeded up to a point. That night she slept spasmodically, waking in starts and listening intently in case Tex should be calling. But she heard no sound from him, and she concluded that had he required her he would have called. Why shouldn't he call her, all things considered?

The next morning Sylvia found Tex awake, and looking weak and slightly hollow-eyed. He managed to eat a little breakfast, but was curiously silent all the while she was there. His helplessness was troubling him considerably. Before she came in he had tried to get up, only to start his chest wound bleeding again. By nature a man of action, this enforced inactivity was hateful to him.

"How's Poc?" Tex asked a little later.

"She'll soon be well. I put some ointment on her wounds."

"Good! I can't quite understand what happened to Ryan. How did he come to get killed? And how did you manage to get into that river?"

"Pocahantas killed Ryan."

Tex's eyes brightened at this, and it was evident that he wanted to hear more.

"I don't know how he got hold of her," Sylvia told him. "When I saw Ryan first, he was beating her, and she was doing her best to unseat him. He tried to take the rifle from me, and in the struggle Pocahontas must have been hurt. She rushed off with him and threw him near the edge of the cliff. Then she deliberately trampled on him."

"Good hoss! Say, he deserved it. And then?"

"I went to him, and he lied to me. He told me you were dead."

"Maybe he thought I was. After the scrap they trussed up me and Morning Star and yanked us into the loft at the top of the place. How it caught fire I don't know. Anyway, there was a stampede early in the morning, and they rushed out and left us where we were. I managed to get free before things got too warm, and went on the trail of Pocahontas. I spotted Ryan riding through the wood and got onto him. When I reached the cliff I found the horse wandering and saw Ryan's corpse and you hanging onto that rock below—"

His eyes grew a little pensive as he reconstructed the adventure. "It's a good job the water was deep," he mused.

"It was courageous of you, Tex," Sylvia put in quietly.

"Not much! I said my prayers before I took that dive. Say, I was scared to death!"

"That makes it all the more courageous. If it had been me up there, I should have been petrified with fear. It was fear that sent me over the edge. I looked down and saw that terrible abyss and got into a panic. Uhh!"

"Well, it's ended all right, anyway. We'll not be troubled with that human wolf any more, and without him the rest of the gang will fade away like the early

mist. I guess you and Morning Star brought me back here?"

She nodded.

"How you got me on the horse beats me."

"It was Morning Star. She is remarkably strong—for a woman," Sylvia replied, with averted head.

"She's Injun," he said, as if that was quite sufficient explanation. "Say, Sylvia, while I'm crooked why don't you get her in to lend a hand with things?"

Her eyes flashed at the suggestion. "No."

"Why not?"

"I'll have to change that bandage," she said evasively. "It looks as if the wound is bleeding again."

"It can wait."

"Nothing can wait. Everything is lost by waiting. I ought to know that."

While Tex digested this swift retort Sylvia undid the bandage and after bathing the wound tied it up again. He noticed there was less repugnance in her eyes now. It looked as if she, too, was getting hardened.

"That's better," he said with a sigh. "But it makes a fellow feel like two cents lying here. Grub must be short, and I've got some traps laid up the river."

"I'll attend to those."

"You're great!"

"Great!" She laughed harshly. "Here I feel like a dwarf—a useless doll! It's a pity I wasn't born an Indian—like your friend Morning Star."

"Maybe if you had been I—"

"What then?" she asked challengingly.

"Things might have been different."

"If—if!" she exclaimed passionately.

"My whole life seems to be based on 'ifs.' If I had not gone up there yesterday you would not be lying here. It was that struggle in the water that—"

"I'm glad you did come."

"Why?"

"Dunno! I'm just glad; that's all."

Sylvia shook her head and turned away. While she was with him, and his fine eyes were on her, the obstacle had a way of tending to diminish. She did not desire that it should do that. There were certain things in life that were un-supportable, and this surely was one.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A STROKE OF GOOD LUCK.

TEX'S recovery was amazing. In a few days the deep hollows under his eyes had filled out and his great body began to get revitalized. Sylvia watched him with ever-increasing wonder. She imagined that he would be compelled to keep his bed for a month, but scarcely a week passed before he was out of it.

"The arm feels a bit stiff," he said. "Guess I'll have to use it lightly for a week or two. Now I'll remove this darned weed."

The "weed" was an inch growth of beard, and its removal brought back the old Tex, with his square pugnacious jaw. The blue eyes had become brilliant again, and altogether he looked fit for anything.

Then the weather changed and prevented his going out. A violent storm raged for two days and snowed up everything. When at last the sky cleared, the temperature fell alarmingly, and all that was left of the river was a couple of yards of black sluggish water.

The fish supply was still plentiful, but flour was reduced to ten pounds, and there was barely enough coffee to last a week. Also the feed for the horse was rapidly disappearing. A trip to some outpost became a necessity.

This formed part of the main problem. Tex, watching his wife, wondered exactly where they stood. So far as he could see nothing was changed. They were as far apart as on the day when he had taken her away against her will. Though she had nursed him most dutifully, he could discern no unbending in her attitude. Conversation was a little easier, but at times in the middle of a sentence she would break off and bring it to an abrupt conclusion. Yet she was more human. Cold hauteur had changed, it seemed, to deliberate apathy. She had thanked him for saving her life, with undoubted sincerity, but beyond that natural act of grace she offered him nothing.

In a vague way Tex saw the end approaching. He had it in his power to hold her, but what was the use, he argued? To be in close contact with her was but a daily reminder of his failure. The crucial point was whether he

should take her with him when he went to get his new supply of provisions and set her feet on the first rung of the ladder of freedom.

It was difficult to reach this decision, for the old burning love was still rampant. True, he had lived without her before and could do so again, but life would be a different thing. Having hovered on the edge of marital bliss, to retreat forever from it was no easy matter.

The alternative, he thought, was to continue in this way until perhaps he poisoned the better part of him. Better to let her go than that should happen. Full of the great problem he ran across to Morning Star for the first time since their last adventure. Her dark eyes became full of joy as she saw him looking fit again. He shook her hand.

"Here we are again, Star!"

"You well again now?"

"Sure! Feeling good. And how's the young chief?"

"Very good! Grow bigger and bigger."

"Where is he?"

She dragged the youngster from the wigwam and handed him over to Tex, who bounced him up and down, until the boy squealed with delight.

"Why don't you go to your people?" he asked with a return to seriousness.

"Gone away. Not know where."

"You could find them, I guess."

"Maybe so, but chief if he take me will not take boy. No go without boy."

Tex admired the stout courage that filled her. The tragedy of her undoing had always affected him deeply.

"Then go farther south. I'll lend you some cash."

She shook her head. "Some day father come back. I wait here until he come."

She evidently believed this, and Tex was amazed at her credulity after two years of cruel desertion.

"Did—did he say that?"

"Yes. Tell Morning Star stay here, and one day he come and make home."

"Maybe I could ginger him up a bit if I knew where to lay hands on him. You say the word, and I'll bring him along all right."

"Morning Star promise never tell," she replied stubbornly.

Tex frowned and wondered how long this misplaced trust would last. Doubtless the man had almost forgotten there was ever such a person as this dark-eyed, pensive girl of the wilderness.

Probably he was married to some woman of his own class and enjoying life to the full.

"You're a wonderful kid!" he mused.

"I dare say you still love him?"

"Yes," she lisped. "Love him very much."

It was certainly a study in contrasts when Tex considered his own position. Was it then true that a man had to treat a woman like a dog before she got to appreciate him? He knew it was not, but all the same it was queer that this girl could go on loving a creature who had presumably deserted her forever, while from the woman he had married and worshiped he got nothing but frigid resentment.

"Well, it's sure a queer world," he said. "Look after him well; he's going to make a fine boy."

"Make big hunter like you," Morning Star returned with a smile. "Hunt and catch everything."

"Yep; I'm good at catching things," Tex said. "Sometimes I catch more than I can rightly handle. I'll have to give him a few lessons on the things it ain't always desirable to catch."

"What things?"

"Things that are born beautiful and free and are sometimes more ornamental than useful."

Deeply regretting this remark the next moment, and afraid that she might interpret it correctly, he gave her back her child and went on his way. Deep as the snow was, he decided to give Pocahontas some exercise and turned back to get her from the stable. Under Sylvia's doctoring she was almost her old self again and welcomed her master with joy.

He remembered that Ryan's body still lay on the ledge above the gorge, and he set off to give it a decent burial, taking with him a pick and shovel. When he reached the place, the snow had hidden the corpse, but he found it without much trouble, and taking some papers from the pockets he carried out his grim task.

Then he made down the mountain path

and reached the scene of the recent fire. There seemed to be little worth salvaging among the debris, and he was turning away when he caught sight of a cave in the rock behind where the mill had stood. An inspection of the interior yielded unexpected treasure. There were two large sacks of flour, coffee and tea, some canned fruit and pork, and two trusses of hay, together with a small sack of oats. It was the first stroke of good luck that had come his way for months, and he began to pack the horse with all she could carry.

Pleased with his haul Tex walked beside Pocahontas all the way to the shack. Feeding the horse with the newly acquired oats, he took the miscellaneous provisions indoors and piled them on the table. Sylvia heard him from her room and came out.

"Look at that," he said.

"Coffee, tea, and food! How——"

"I found Ryan's commissariat department. There's a sack of flour in the shed, and another back where I found this lot. Poc will be able to feed herself up, too, for I brought some hay and oats."

"Now you won't have to make a trip?" she asked.

"Nope! We've enough stuff to tide us over the winter. Say, I reckon Morning Star ought to share in this. We've enough to spare a bit."

"Of course!"

It was difficult to say how much enthusiasm there was in the remark. It was a natural-enough response, but somehow it rang queer in his ears.

"Will you run over with it?" he asked.

"Hadn't you better go? I am sure she would prefer to accept it from you."

"I don't see why."

"You are such old friends."

"Very well!" he replied slowly, and began to make up a parcel.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BREAKING POINT.

THE change in Tex's plans rather complicated matters. Though the need to secure food was no longer existent, the other need seemed as immediate as ever. He had seen Sylvia's face tighten

up when he had mentioned having enough food to tide over the winter and knew full well the despair caused by the remark.

Something had to be done soon; that was evident. When he took the parcel to Morning Star and received her abundant gratitude, Tex was still wrestling with the big problem. If Sylvia was to go, it must be within the next week, or perhaps it would be too late in the season to travel at all without dogs and other necessary winter impedimenta. Cold as it was now, it would be colder soon. They were yet only on the fringe of winter.

"Big wind come again," said Morning Star, gazing up at the sky.

"You think so?" Tex returned abstractedly.

"Yes. Maybe to-night; maybe to-morrow."

Her prognostication indorsed his own opinion. By "big wind" the Indian girl meant the terror of the north—a blizzard. There had been plenty of wind so far, but nothing really big. If it brought much more snow, then his strengthening resolution to cut the bond would be canceled for some time. It looked as if Fate itself was conspiring to prolong his jailership.

"Maybe it won't be much," he observed.

Morning Star, however, thought otherwise. Her almost uncanny knowledge of weather forecasts in the north left no shadow of doubt in her mind. When Tex left her, she began to hammer in the steel pegs that held her small tent.

When Tex went to bed the sky was still clear and the great frosty stars depended like lamps. His long tramp, on top of his comparatively weak condition, brought sleep almost immediately. But it was not the undisturbed oblivion that he was accustomed to enjoy. His slumber was filled with hideous combats in which his body seemed to be paralyzed. He found himself fighting with Ryan, with huge bears, and rushing rivers.

Then the scene changed, and he was being swept along on a turbulent sea in a match-box ship that creaked and shuddered under him. A gigantic, foam-crested wave was bearing down on him.

He saw it glistening heaven-high above him and knew that the last moment had come. It broke with a thundering roar that hurt his brain. With a great start he woke up.

For a moment Tex thought that the dream was real, for the shack was rocking to and fro, and a tremendous noise came from outside. Then he suddenly realized that the blizzard had arrived. Strongly built as the shack was, it seemed to be in imminent danger of being blown to atoms. A large crack had appeared between two of the logs, and through this came powdery snow onto his face.

He lighted a candle and put it in a sheltered spot, while he stuffed the corner of a blanket into the widening crack. In all his experience he had never heard a worse wind. It howled and thundered in turn. It made noises like a thousand beasts in torment. It lifted up huge masses of snow and flung them with dull thuds onto the sides of the shack.

"Oh! Oh!"

Above the infernal din Tex heard Sylvia's voice raised in terror. He flew to the door, then halted. Never had he been in that room while she was there. Another terrific gust struck the shack, and for a moment he believed it was going to break up."

"Tex!"

That settled the matter. He grabbed the candle and ran out. A draft blew open Sylvia's door as he shut his own, and he saw her standing like a white statue within, her eyes full of terror as the thundering wind smashed madly against the timbers.

"Tex! Tex!"

She staggered toward him, and, putting the candle on the mantelshelf, he caught her and held her tight.

"I'm—afraid!" she moaned.

"It's only a bit of wind."

"The shack will come down."

"Not it!"

"It's terrible—terrible!"

The soft, warm, lightly clad form trembled against him. He saw that, like himself, she had been aroused from sleep by the appalling din and even now was scarcely awake.

"Will it last long?"

"Can't say. But there's nothing to

fear. The shack has stood the worst, I guess."

"I called before, but you did not come."

Sylvia was looking at him reproachfully, and the large, deep eyes were like sparks in a powder magazine. After all this soft, warm, clinging woman was his wife. His arms tightened about her, and to his mind the raging blizzard seemed to be stilled. There was wonder in her eyes—a look he did not quite understand.

"You're beautiful!" he said hoarsely. "Beautiful!"

Again a slight tremor of her bosom, and the clinging arms became looser. But he was past noticing this significant fact. Pressing her to him, he sank his head and kissed her on the lips.

Then he gasped as the eyes which had been so soft and wistful became charged with fury. She was now fully awake and was remembering the other woman. She fought herself free and with a choking sob raised her hand and slapped him on the cheek.

"How dare you! You coward!"

"I—I——"

"Go—go!" she cried. "I hate you for that!"

Tex turned and with set face walked out. He had reached heaven only to fall out of it with a painful thud. Anyway it settled his little problem. His line of action was now clear enough. It was the breaking point.

CHAPTER XL.

THE END AT LAST.

SITTING down heavily on his bed, Tex stared fixedly at the opposite wall. His face still stung from the slap that Sylvia had administered, and on the basis of his own code of conduct he had to admit that he deserved it. She had merely called him—not asked him to kiss her. That had been purely his own idea, and this was the result.

Being beaten by a woman was not at all a pleasant experience, especially when it happened to be the woman he loved. Humiliation dictated the only possible solution—they must part, and at once. To keep her longer was only to pile up future misery for both of them. Tex

accepted the situation with as much resignation as he could master.

A fearful tremor of the shack caused him to realize that the storm was still on, and suddenly he remembered Morning Star. She and her baby were out there in the thick of it, with nothing but a few square yards of canvas and skin to protect them. To leave her to the fury of that murderous wind was quite impossible.

Tex slipped on boots and coat and gloves and went to the outer door. On opening it he was almost blown backward. Putting his head down he plunged forward and managed to close the door behind him.

The half mile between the shack and Morning Star's camp took the better part of an hour. Everything was blotted out by the whirling snow, and his normal good sense of direction was impaired by the suffocating wind.

When ultimately he reached the spot he saw a vague form wrestling with the collapsing tent. He ran forward and lent the girl a hand, but it was a full minute before she realized that he was there. In her surprise she dropped the rope on which she was hauling and up went the tent like a balloon. Tex stayed it for a few seconds, but had to let it go in the end.

"Never mind!" he yelled. "Where's the kid?"

Morning Star was already rushing to save the child from being blown after the tent. Tex got there first and collared the infant, who was sleeping as if all was quite peaceful. Morning Star was crouching beside him, half frozen from her prolonged task in keeping the tent secure.

"Leave the other things!" Tex cried in her ear. "Get them to-morrow. Come to the shack."

She followed him through the blackness until it was riven by the light from Tex's window. Floundering through the deep drift near the side of the building, they reached the door and entered the warm retreat. Tex at once took the infant into his room and laid it in his bed, while the mother warmed herself by the stove.

"Some journey that!" he said. "When

you're a bit thawed you'd better sleep in there. I'll roast myself by the fire."

The Indian girl was too exhausted to refuse, and a little later she rose from her squatting position and touched him gently on the hand. "Very tired. Sleep now."

"You look as if you needed it. Maybe it will blow over by morning. Good night!"

"Good night, Tex!" she said and shuffled through the open door.

As his eyes followed her he became aware that there was a light in Sylvia's room, shining through the space at the bottom of the rough door. She was awake. There was no room for misinterpretation, he thought. It was obvious that he could not let a woman stay outdoors on such a night—and with a young baby! Sylvia would surely understand that.

With this task performed, his mind got to work on the great problem. By some means he must get Sylvia away. If only he could escort her to the nearest farmstead there was little doubt that she could make railhead in comparative comfort. But even a hundred miles in the present conditions was a titanic task. He groaned as he realized that for the first time he was really tackling the problem. He had often suspected that it would come to this, but against the weighted-down pan of the scale there always had been a small grain of hope.

He was going to give her freedom—with his own hands. But even though she got back to her own people she would still be his wife and fettered with the chains which he unwittingly had placed upon her. That, too, must be ended. Having a love for thoroughness, he pondered how best to bring this about.

Lying there as wide awake as if it were midday he thought of a drastic plan. He recalled that Sylvia had asked him once or twice about the child of Morning Star, but he always had been reluctant to discuss the matter. Suppose—suppose she could be brought to suspect—nay, believe—that the child was his? He shuddered at his own mental promptings, and yet the idea held some promise. She could use that groundless fact to get full liberty.

It wanted considering, for his soul rebelled at acting a lie. But opposed to his innate repugnance for untruth was the knowledge that it contained the key which she sought. There was no danger of discovery in Morning Star's direction. To her his slightest wish was an order. His own feelings he did not consider. What if Sylvia thought him a profligate, an unprincipled ruffian, he would have the satisfaction of knowing that she could obtain what she most desired in the world—her freedom. That was all that really mattered.

Before morning came Tex had decided upon that line of action, innocent of the fact that the unuttered lie was already looming like a mountain between him and the woman who he believed despised him. It was unfortunate he did not know that the dead Ryan was acting across the grave, and that by the irony of coincidence he was going to substantiate that untruth.

By dawn the blizzard had blown itself out and a wonderful calm set in. Morning Star awakened early and, as if she appreciated the situation, made to depart before Sylvia was about. Tex, however, remembered that her tent was gone and tried to induce her to stay until he could retrieve it.

"I find it," she said. "Must go now. Wind all gone."

She was near the door when he decided to start putting his plan into action. He went across to her.

"Has my—my wife ever asked you about that boy?" he asked.

She shook her head wonderingly.

"Good! If she should ask you—anything, I want you to say nothing."

She looked at him with her head slightly to one side, as if perplexed.

"Do you get that?"

"Morning Star not quite understand."

"There's no need for you to understand—much. Whatever she may say—about the boy—you are not to deny it. Even if—"

He could not finish the sentence, but he thought that her intuition was working, for her eyes soon became wide with astonishment.

"Maybe you're beginning to grasp things," he said. "It's for the best, Star."

"But if white woman ask——"

"Whatever she asks you must say nothing," Tex broke in. "Whatever she thinks, you must let her go on thinking it."

"Morning Star think you have big trouble."

"The biggest! But we are going to put it right. We've been good friends, I guess, and you can help me a lot by doing as I say."

Her breast heaved convulsively. She had sense enough to see what he meant by his veiled remarks, for she had been very observant since Sylvia had come onto the scene—far more observant than Tex, who fondly believed he was about to explode an entirely new bomb.

"If she think bad things like that, and Morning Star say nothing, then she go away," she protested.

"So!"

"You want her go away?"

"Yep!"

Morning Star passed her hand across her brow. This she did not understand at all; but her part was clear, and her gratitude was such as to render her completely submissive.

"Morning Star understand," she said.

"No speak a word about boy."

"Good!"

Morning Star went out into the cold to hunt for her scattered belongings, and Tex sighed deeply. Now that the thing was started, he meant to see it through to the bitter end. First Sylvia's freedom, then his. For him it would mean a return to the old nomadic life—a life which would no longer be carefree. He would remember Sylvia all the days of his life and carry his gaping wounds to his grave.

While Tex was cooking the breakfast, Sylvia came in, and he saw immediately that she had been weeping. Tears of rage, no doubt! She ate but little and avoided his gaze throughout the meal. When it was over she stooped and picked up a small woolen thing that was lying on the floor. It was a baby's sock. She put it on the table without a word.

"The kid must have dropped it," Tex said. "I had to bring in Morning Star last night. Her tent was blown away."

"I heard her."

"She went back just now."

"You should have asked her to stay."

"I did, but she wouldn't."

Sylvia's eyes flashed at this. It was evident that she was on the verge of an outburst, and he gave her the opening.

"Maybe she'd stay if you asked her," he suggested.

"I? Ask her to—— Are you mad to make such a suggestion? Do you think I am blind not to see that she—she worships you? Why does she stay about this place? Because you are here to consider her before any one else. Why does she sneak away early in the morning unless it is because her conscience——"

"Steady!" he muttered.

"You'll defend her; I know that."

"Why shouldn't I? She has no one else in the world to put out an arm for her. It's a pretty hard thing for a woman to be exiled in a country like this with a child to support. Whatever happens I'm not going to let that boy suffer."

"No one wants to see a child suffer. But haven't you done enough for him already?"

Her eyes held a challenge, though she tried to conceal it. With a burning heart Tex gave her the lead.

"I can never do enough," he mumbled.

"Why not?"

He picked up his rifle and began to polish the barrel with an old rag.

"Tex!"

He turned his head and saw her breast heaving. It amazed him to realize that the seed so lightly scattered had taken root with such rapidity.

"I—you said—just now—— Is there anything you want to tell me—ought to tell me? Is——"

Sylvia stopped suddenly as there came the unfamiliar sound of bells from outside, mingled with the woof of a dog, and men's gruff voices. As her eyes wandered to the window she saw the woolen headgear of men pass and then noticed that the sled had stopped outside.

"Who can that——"

There was a loud rap on the door, and the next moment an inspector of the Mounted Police entered and saluted. Sylvia, still greatly agitated, remained motionless, but Tex wandered across and welcomed the visitor.

"My name's McLeod," he said cheerfully. "Inspector McLeod. Never dreamed of finding a shack up here. Hope I'm not intruding."

"Not much! I'm Tex Inskip, and this lady is—is my wife."

Sylvia came forward and smiled somewhat wanly. For a moment she had believed that it was her father who had found her at last. But the police were better than no one at all.

"Can we offer you some breakfast?" she asked.

"Thanks, no! We had ours two hours ago. I've got two men outside. We're trying to round up a fellow named Ryan who broke out of jail last fall."

"Ryan!" gasped Sylvia.

"So you've heard of him? He used to have his headquarters up this way, and I've an idea it was your husband who got him put under restraint last time."

"It was," replied Tex. "And he's well under restraint now, I guess."

"Eh?"

"You're too late. He's dead and buried."

"What!"

"A horse kicked him to death, and I buried him with my own hands. I've got a few papers that I found on him. I'll get them."

While he hunted for the papers, Sylvia talked with McLeod. She saw in him a solution to her own problem. Now that his quest was ended, he would doubtless make south to lodge his report. Outside was a sled and dogs and two other members of the police. It looked as if the end was coming at long last—if certain horrible suspicions were proved true.

CHAPTER XLI.

BOWED, BUT UNBEATEN.

SYLVIA learned that the policemen were camping by the river for that night and returning to headquarters the following morning. It accelerated her decision. From what Tex had let fall she concluded that her worst suspicions were well founded. His attitude seemed to be only one point short of confession. To go to him again was repugnant to her. She decided to wring the truth from Morning Star without delay.

She experienced some trouble in finding the innocent pawn in the game, for Morning Star had gone after her vanished tent. It was two hours later that Sylvia found her carrying a heavy load back to her old camping place, in addition to the baby on her back. She smiled as she saw Sylvia approaching and put down the heavier load.

"I want to speak to you," said Sylvia. Morning Star waited meekly.

"It's about that—your child."

The dark eyes became wary. She remembered Tex's injunctions and said nothing.

"Won't you tell me his real name—the name of his father?"

Morning Star shook her head slowly.

"But I must know. There's a reason why I should know."

"Not understand. Morning Star's son. Her business."

Sylvia bit her lip. She was aware that if by any chance her suspicion was wrongly founded, her interference was abominable. Yet the force of circumstances drove her on.

"I must know the truth—I must. I am not blaming you; don't think that. I only wish I could help you. Perhaps I can if you will help me."

"Morning Star no want help."

"But I do." Her voice became hoarse with emotion. "My—my—Tex has known you a long time, hasn't he? Four or five years, I believe?"

The proud head nodded.

"He is fond of you and fond of that boy. Why—why?"

The long silence drove the questioner to desperation. She seized Morning Star's arm and looked into her eyes fixedly. "I must know about that boy. Was it—was it——"

The name would not come. She was conscious of a feeling of deepest humiliation, pleading as she was before this woman of another race.

"It was!" she cried. "It was, or you would answer!"

Morning Star opened her lips to speak, but closed them again without uttering a sound. Faithful servant of Tex, as she was, obedience came even before compassion.

"All right! I—I understand."

With swimming brain Sylvia turned away. She branched off before she reached the shack and made for the river where she could see the camp of the inspector and his men. To face Tex just now was impossible. McLeod greeted her warmly, and she did her best to hide her agitation.

"Your husband has saved us a deal of trouble," McLeod said. "We calculated we should be out a month or two getting Ryan. That fellow has always been a regular hornets' nest to us."

"You'll be glad to get back?" she asked.

"Sure! This is not the sort of place to spend a winter in. Are you staying on?"

"I—I'm not sure. I—I think my husband may stay, but personally I should like to go south."

"Of course!"

McLeod was regarding her intently, trying vainly to remember where he had seen her or her portrait. Sylvia guessed what he was thinking, but did not enlighten him.

"You'll have some difficulty in making that trail without a dog team and sled," he said.

"I know. Perhaps I ought to have gone before. Are you passing Roaring Falls?"

"Yes."

A queer little sigh left her lips.

"If you do intend going south, you ought to give us the pleasure of escorting you," suggested McLeod.

"Thank you; I was just considering that possibility, but it is rather short notice."

"It is a bit sudden, but I'm afraid we can't stay over to-morrow."

"To-morrow! I must speak to my husband."

"Maybe you can persuade him to come, too. It's going to be a tough winter this year."

"He is keen on the hunting."

"Hunting!"

"Well—trapping. It's his livelihood."

"H'm! Takes some grit to live through a winter that way. Isn't he the man who ran off with all the prizes last summer at the stampede at Roaring Falls?"

"Yes."

"Thought the name was a bit familiar. Those fellows down there are still talking about it. Wish I could persuade him to join the Royal Mounted. He'd be worth three ordinary men."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't succeed," Sylvia returned with a laugh that was forced. "Tex is what he calls a 'one-man outfit.' He wants to be boss or nothing."

McLeod laughed. Tex impressed him as he did all men—and some women. He was not in the least astonished to find in Tex's wife a refined type of woman—and a superbly beautiful one at that. Men like Tex could reach high, he argued. All the same he was a little surprised to think of Tex's staying up in the mountains when his charming wife was contemplating going south.

"I'll talk to Tex," Sylvia said. "Your kind offer may solve a little problem."

"He won't accept it," McLeod replied. "I shouldn't if I were so fortunate as to be in his place."

"Perhaps you would," she said. "You never know."

The banter ended, she went to look for Tex, but found the shack empty. There was a brief note on the table informing her that he would be back by sundown. She was disappointed at this, for she was in the mood to settle the matter now. Determined to go whatever obstacles he might try to place in her way, she began to pack the few things she possessed.

If Tex tried to stop her, an awkward situation might be created. In this eventuality she determined to throw herself upon McLeod's mercy. Where that might end she did not know—and did not greatly care. To live with Tex any longer was utterly impossible now that the truth was out.

While she tied up the rough parcel she recalled the immediate past and was surprised to find that she could still think of him without much rancor. Had he not performed that magnificent feat in the gonge? But for him she would doubtless be dead now. Through all the period of tension he had remained a man.

His error of the past was not too great to be forgiven if he had not tried to cover it up. That was the fact that hurt most. It was bad enough in all

conscience, but women were used to forgiving men and in that forgiveness sometimes reaped great happiness. She, too, might have forgiven if he had come to her and laid bare his soul, as she thought he ought.

It was remarkable to what extent her attitude had changed. A month or two before she craved for liberty for no other reason than that she hated this life and his mastery. Now the sole impelling force was this specter from the past. Her packing done she sat and waited for him.

Tex returned at the time stated, with two good pelts over his shoulder. The first thing his eyes lighted on was her rough pack beside the stove. His eyes glanced from it to her, and his mouth twitched as he guessed the truth.

"It was hard going up there," he said casually.

"Tex!" She stood up and faced him. "I'm going."

"Going where?"

"Home—to my people."

She expected to be met with a dogged refusal, but instead he shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head.

"So it's come to that—again?"

"Yes," she replied. "It had to come, in the end. We have been living a lie. I can't endure it any longer. If—if you have the slightest regard for me don't try to make it difficult. I want my freedom now, and there is a reason why I should have it, isn't there?"

"I suppose there is."

Her breath came hard at this. "So you confess?"

"What?"

"About—about that girl—Morning Star."

"Will it—make matters easier if I do?"

"It will give me back my liberty."

"The thing you crave for."

"Why not?" she replied earnestly. "Would you like to be tied to an existence that was hateful? I know everything."

"Everything!"

"I spoke to that—girl. But she would not speak. It was only because you had ordered her not to, wasn't it?"

"Yep! And what now?"

"It is the end. McLeod and his men

are going back to-morrow. I am going with them as far as Roaring Falls."

"Roaring Falls—where we first met."

"Don't! I want to forget that dreadful mistake I made. I want to start afresh and try to find the happiness I have missed. You can't stop me now—you dare not!"

"Maybe I don't want you," Tex replied quietly. "You deserve to be happy. Why, even an animal has a right to happiness. Shall I speak to McLeod?"

"Yes."

Tex went out at once and stood for a moment breathing deeply in the keen dry air. The thing was done, accomplished, but how it hurt to realize that at that time to-morrow he would be alone! Still, she would be happy, he thought. With all the Livingstone money at her disposal, with the complete freedom given her by the divorce court, she would soon forget all this and probably marry that simpering fool with a window in his eye, and flit like a wonderful butterfly through the sunny vistas of a life that was foreign to him.

Tex found McLeod making ready for departure on the morrow and shook hands with him as if nothing was amiss; he even accepted a pipe of tobacco from the inspector's pouch, only to forget to light it afterward.

"Can you do me a favor, inspector?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"My wife needs a change, and you're going back, so there's a fine opportunity to bring it about. Will you put her safely on the rail at Roaring Falls?"

"It would be a pleasure. But why don't you come along as well? It's a dog's life up here in winter."

"I got work to do. Nope; It'll take a darn lot of cold to kill me. Why, I'll make a fortune before she comes back in the spring."

"I'll bet you will, too. But I'd have been glad of your company."

"Thanks, but it can't be done."

"Sorry! Well, we're planning to hit the trail soon after sunup. Is that too early for your wife?"

"Not a bit. I'll bring her along in good time. Are you all right for grub?"

"Stacks of it! We calculated on be-

ing out for a month or two. If you could do with half a pound of tobacco you only have to say the word."

Tex accepted this with considerable pleasure, for he was down to his last pipeful. He returned to the shack to find Sylvia in her bedroom, but she came to the door in response to his knock.

"I've fixed it," he said. "Sunup tomorrow morning."

"Thank you!"

The door remained open, but there seemed no more to be said. Already Sylvia seemed to be on the other side of the divide. Tex turned away lest some madness should sweep over him and seek to cancel all his plans.

In one way he was glad of the arrival of McLeod, but in another way he was sorry. For he would have liked to put Sylvia on the train himself; to have left her in the place where he had first met her. There was no reason in this desire, but it was there all the same. He hated to hand her over to another man, even though he was a straight man, as he knew McLeod to be.

"What's the use!" he muttered. "What's the use!"

To live in that shack again when she had gone would be quite impossible. The spirit of her would dwell there. Every object he touched would remind him of her. When she went he, too, must go—anywhere. Then there was Pocahontas—what should he do with the horse? It would be cruel to take her out in the deep snows. He must part with Pocahontas, too, or make some arrangement for her comfort during the time he was away.

He decided on the latter course. Having given away his wife, he did not feel like giving away his horse as well. Broken and dejected, he felt as if the solid mountains were pressing on his shoulders. But with a return of his old spirit he threw them off and raised his head erect. He was not going to let this beat him. The wilderness called, but not the dark dismal pit.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out August 1st. It began in the May 15th issue. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.

Too Late

A WILD-HAIRED, morbid young man was raving about the emptiness of life. "The sooner the world ends the better," he said. "We all ought to be annihilated."

"My dear fellow," his friend replied, "the world's packed with interesting things. They've just discovered that human life began on this earth about a million years ago—and you talk of wiping us all out."

"A million years ago?"

"The papers are full of it."

"Oh, well," said the morbid man miserably, "it's too late to do anything about it, then."

Being Careful

WORD had been received at the power house of an electric light system that an overhead wire had fallen in a crowded street.

A man was sent at once to the spot.

When he arrived he found a crowd of people handling the wire in a most careless manner.

Going up to the nearest man he admonished him severely. "You had no right to touch that wire. You might have been killed outright by the shock!"

The fellow put on a knowing air. "Ah," said he, "I was mighty careful. I felt it carefully before I took hold of it!"

Daniel Didn't Dare!

DANIEL, a very shy youth, summoned up courage enough to escort a pretty girl home from church. At the breakfast table the next morning his father asked: "Well, Danny, did you take any of the girls home last night?"

"Yes," replied Daniel, blushing.

"Who was she?"

Daniel hesitated, and then blurted out: "I thought it was Rosie Haven, but when we got to the corner she went into Mary Bates' house."

"But couldn't you have found out by her voice?"

"Neither of us said a word," Daniel replied.

Diamond

Smiles—



By
Herb Roemer

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

HIS SINGLE WEAKNESS.

WHEN Connelly discovered him and dwelt upon the momentous question, Jerry McGee, familiarly known wherever a baseball was fumbled as the redoubtable pilot of the Raven ball club, was quietly preparing to take a siesta. Trust a newspaper scribe—and especially Harry Connelly, war correspondent of the *Evening News*—to be the first to erupt into speech upon such an all-absorbing, baffling problem. Besides, Connelly was a privileged character and to be allowed some liberties. Persuading “Red” Smithers from jumping to an ill-fated outlaw league was one reason for his being allowed to touch on the topic; helping secure Alva Martin, outfielder, was the other.

“Skipper,” the newspaper man said to McGee, “to win the league calico the Ravens will have to take two out of three from the Blue Sox, and Ambrose will surely be the mound artist you’ll face in the first and third games. Now, tell me, just how are you going to turn the trick?”

Right then and there Connelly asked a little question with which twenty-five finished exponents of the national pastime were inwardly grappling. Here they were, the Raven ball club, after a highly successful Eastern swing, homeward bound to take on the Blue Sox in a three-game series and bring to a close one of

the tightest and hottest pennant chases ever waged outside of magazine covers. If they copped two of the three diamond arguments, they captured the league gonfalon by a few decimals.

If they didn’t—well, some of them would be spectators at the little world’s series between the Blue Sox and the Scouts. Gerald Ambrose had stepped off a college diamond onto a major-league one and promptly hurled eighteen straight wins. He was the competent delivery clerk the Ravens had to hurdle to compete in the golden classic.

Four times that season had the Ravens looked over his sparkling assortment of wares. Four times he disdainfully had refused to permit them to win. It surely looked as if he was going to be the big steam roller to block the passage of their little baseball machine into Pennant Avenue.

McGee gave himself up to a moment’s contemplation of the rural scenery before responding to Connelly. Then he turned with an ironic smile. “You said a mouthful then,” he replied. “My club can beat any ordinary pitching wizard, but how it’s going to beat one who also packs Aladdin’s lamp around with him is beyond me.”

“From your harangue,” Connelly said, “one would judge Ambrose to be superhuman. I, however, happen to think otherwise. Let us take the cold facts of the case. Here is your pitching genius—Gerald Ambrose—as pretty as his name and unanimously acclaimed by the

nation's fanettes to be the handsomest disciple of the national pastime. No weakness, whatever, in his pitching repertoire, as eighteen consecutive victories will brilliantly attest. But he has a natural weakness of the heart. How that boy——"

"Loves the lip-stick wielders!" finished "Tiny" Hildreth, Raven six-foot-three first baseman and field captain, dropping into the seat beside Connelly.

"Righto! In capital red letters and a hyphen between!" agreed the newspaper man. He fell into deep thought and a favorite pose—hands extended before him in a supplicating manner, finger tips pressed to finger tips. Suddenly a dazzling smile illuminated his lean face.

"At last I've got it!" he cried. "Just figured the way we'll beat handsome Ambrose that third game. I've doped it out," he went on, "that each club is going to win a game. Ambrose, I figure, will win the first game. We'll take 'Lefty' Anderson for the second, and then, the Ravens will wallop Ambrose for the third game and pennant. And immodest little me," he finished impressively, "will be one of the two big reasons why!"

Connelly favored McGee and Hildreth with a broad tantalizing smile and went on: "And I'll promise not to administer any knock-out drops or be guilty of any foul play. Just going to take a flier in psychology, that's all."

Jerry McGee looked at Hildreth gravely, tapping his forehead the while in a significant manner. "The man is cuckoo!" he whispered loudly.

"Cuckoo—nothing!" Connelly retorted, unruffled. "If the series narrows down to the third game, I'll bet you a thousand even that Ambrose loses it and that my little scheme—project—whatever you want to call it—will be the main reason for his defeat. Is it a bet?"

"Is it a bet?" repeated the Raven skipper with a snort. "No! I'll gladly give you two thousand to bring it about. Incidentally, I'll pay all expenses your little project incurs—success or failure!"

Connelly warmly shook McGee's hand, following his impetuous statement, and abruptly left the two in a mental turmoil. He returned a few minutes later with a telegram slip which he handed McGee.

"Read that, gentlemen!" he invited.

"Read that and see if any ray of enlightenment penetrates your beclouded intellects, because I'm telling you nothing."

The wire, McGee noted, was addressed to a Mr. Robert Kilbane, residing in a town famous for its university, and was signed by Connelly. It read:

Imperative you leave for Cincinnati at once with Mademoiselle Adrienne. Have highly remunerative work for you. See me *Evening Mail* office to-morrow afternoon without fail.

CHAPTER II.

STEALING HIS STUFF.

THE town turned out to greet the Raven ball club at the station the next morning and the Chamber of Commerce enthusiastically tendered them a breakfast of rolls, coffee, and numerous other palatable things. In the afternoon, however, before a record-breaking crowd, they didn't dine so heartily.

Eight doughnuts did Ambrose, Apollo of the Diamond, force them to subsist upon during nine innings of strenuous, frenzied pastiming, while the enemy hammered Gilday's offerings to all corners of the lot. Eleven to one was the final score of the massacre with the home club owning the perpendicular figure, and the big crowd went home stunned.

Never had the animated collar-ad been in better form. A baffling change of pace with a sweeping curve mixed in had the home boys throwing their bludgeons away.

They could nick Ambrose's delivery for only three hits and right lucky were they to get those.

The Raven skipper and Hildreth met early that evening in a secluded corner of the Hotel Magnificent to plan their campaign for the morrow's fray. Who should bear down upon them with a highly attractive morsel of femininity dangling from his arm but Connelly. One glance at Connelly's fair companion's animated face, bobbed black hair, shrugging shoulders, and attire, twenty-four hours in advance of the fashions, and Hildreth surmised her to be French—and rightly.

"Mademoiselle Lebanier," said the sport scribe grandiloquently, "permit me to introduce Messrs. McGee and Hil-

dreth, manager extraordinary and first baseman unordinary of the Raven ball club."

After the completion of two sweeping, ceremonious bows, Connelly continued: "Mademoiselle Lebanier is the toast of gay Patee and France's most beautiful and talented screen star, en route for Hollywood."

"Ooh, la la, la!" cried Mademoiselle Adrienne with a laugh and a delightful roll of flashing eyes. "M'sieu' Connelly is such a flatterer, is eet not so?"

Both ball players disclaimed any knowledge of having ever known Connelly to utter an untruth.

"Your friend Mr. Kilbane. Is he with you?" Hildreth asked.

The little pulse-quickener from overseas seemed to find something highly humorous in the innocent little question. Connelly, even, seemed to have difficulty in keeping a straight face.

"*Oui! Oui!*" she found time to say between peals of laughter. "M'sieu' Kilbane is ze good friend."

After another mirthful moment she launched into a little monologue interspersed with many French phrases, shrugging shoulders, and waving hands, telling of her great admiration of the national game. She said she was stopping over that she might attend this all-important series, that she admired ball players in general and especially—and here she wafted two kisses to the ceiling—the "magnifique Ambrose."

Who should come striding toward the little group right then, with all feminine eyes focused upon him, but that same muchly admired player—Ambrose.

Mademoiselle, perceiving him approaching, dropped her handkerchief in her excitement. Ambrose halted, stooped to pick up the little postage-stamp affair. At that second, from behind one of the marble pillars close by, jumped "Hick" Martin, Raven left fielder. He tried to perform the same little task.

McGee and Hildreth looked at the gallant Martin and then at each other in utter amazement. Hick Martin playing the cavalier! It was preposterous! Their surprise was certainly based on good reasons.

Late in February, Connelly had heard

through a friend—a former major leaguer—of a ball-playing fool who was hibernating in the Ozarks. Connelly tipped off McGee, who wired the baseball marvel to report at the Raven's training camp in Texas. He came attired in a shiny blue-serge suit, rubber collar, crimson ready-tied four-in-hand, pink sleeve supporters, and an ancient derby hat.

Setting down an umbrella and a market basket half filled with lunch, he shyly introduced himself as Alva Martin. Five minutes later this big rustic of the bristling, untamed red hair and freckled, homely face was being addressed as "Hick." Five days later, McGee was planning to start him as a regular in the Raven outfield.

Just a natural-born hitter and "ball hawk" Hick Martin proved to be. He was the kind that are born once in a blue moon. The success and adulation of the fans that followed his advent under the big top left him remarkably unchanged.

He still remained the big, simple, good-natured country boy, the goat of a thousand-and-one jokes. While no one could accuse him of being a tightwad, no amount of good-natured kidding could induce him to buy new apparel and rid himself of the ancient attire he had reported in, and which he still continued to wear. Nice new store clothes, he contended, were for dudes who liked to gallivant around the ladies, but not for he-men, like himself, who knew women existed and wondered why.

That was why "Skipper" McGee's and Hildreth's astounded stares gave way to inward convulsions of laughter at witnessing the amusing spectacle before them—Ambrose, the polished, tailored man of the world, playing tug of war with uncouth Martin, the scarecrow of the orchard.

Neither had any great love for the other, and the fact that Ambrose had struck out Martin three times that afternoon didn't tend toward relieving the strained situation. If that wasn't appeal enough to the risibilities of Hildreth and McGee, here was Martin, avowed woman hater, suddenly assuming a Sir Walter Raleigh rôle and striving to gain a lady's favor by trying to steal haughty Gerald

Ambrose's copyrighted act—recovering a lost handkerchief.

This was a little act that the comely Gerald gracefully performed from ten to twenty times daily for highly interested and romantically inclined ladies. Naturally Martin's two interested friends were chuckling with pleasure.

CHAPTER III.

ON EVEN TERMS.

A SMALL crowd gathered around the crouching Martin and Ambrose, who were glaring at each other and showing no inclination to loosen their holds upon the little square of linen and lace. Connelly ended the mirthful tableau by stepping forward and requesting the handkerchief, which was relinquished grudgingly.

Mademoiselle, her property recovered, gave vent to indignant speech. "Messieurs!" she exclaimed, to the accompaniment of stamping feet and tossing head, "you have made of me a show—a performance. I feel disgraced. I retire. *Comprenez?*"

Swiftly she moved away, with Ambrose and Martin following and trying to pacify her.

With protruding eyes, McGee observed Hick's retreating form. "What's the matter with Martin?" he asked in a dazed voice. "Can he be sick?"

"Yes; he's sick all right," contributed Hildreth. "Lovesick!"

Connelly laid a consoling hand upon the Skipper's shoulder, eyes merrily a gleam. "Jerry, Hildreth is right," he said sadly. "Our boy, Hick Martin, has tumbled for a skirt."

McGee groaned. "He sure shows all the symptoms. This afternoon he lost his batting eye and to-night his heart. What will he lose to-morrow—his throwing arm?"

A few minutes later Ambrose passed with a rose, late of mademoiselle's corsage, in his buttonhole.

McGee's eyes followed him admiringly. "There's what I call a fast worker!" he remarked enthusiastically.

"Well, you can't call me exactly an ice wagon," drawled a voice behind him.

Turning, McGee beheld Martin, grin-

ning and holding aloft something white. It was the same little something that just a few minutes before two men had battled to gain—mademoiselle's handkerchief.

"How come?" asked Connelly, after recovering somewhat from the surprise.

"Shucks!" Martin grinned sheepishly. "Can't a feller talk to a gal without all the neighborhood getting nosey?" He carefully stowed away the handkerchief, then continued: "Being tender-hearted, and seeing you three so all-fired curious, I guess I'll have to gab all about it."

"That'll be mighty nice of you, Martin," Hildreth said encouragingly.

"Well," began Hick in his inimitable drawl, "after we reached the elevator with the lady. Ambrose asked to be forgiven. She pouted a little and then stuck a rose in his coat. He raised her hand to his lips and smacked it, saying he's the happiest man in the world. She la-la'd him a little and then waved him away; he lamping me real hard before he went.

"She asked me then," he went on, "if I'm Martin, the Raven ball player. I pleaded guilty, and then she said if I give you this little souvenir—her handkerchief—will you make three hits to-morrow with your big war club? I promised I would, and she said to be sure and not to hurt the air instead. I told her that I had yet to break my word. And, chief," Martin finished with a sober face, "here's hoping to-morrow doesn't find me busting it for the first time."

"Amen!" agreed McGee and Hildreth together.

CHAPTER IV.

A GOOD BET.

TWO big surprises the Raven ball club and fans received before game time of the second battle. The first eye dilator was the Raven's beholding Martin entering the clubhouse attired in new apparel and his unmanageable thatch of auburn hair well vaselined down. The Skipper's selecting Cowherd, a second-string pitcher, to start the fracas for the Robins was the second mouth opener and one that the packed stands assimilated with a loud murmur.

"Just playing Connelly's pastime—tak-

ing a flier in psychology," the Skipper explained to Hildreth. "The Blue Sox have us figured to start Mayfield and planned their campaign accordingly. Starting this kid, Cowherd, instead, on the firing line, will knock their battle plans sky high and enable us to get the jump on them."

Though no one will ever know if Old Man Psychology was responsible for it or not, the Ravens surely did get the jump upon the enemy.

The first three batsmen to face him, Cowherd disposed of easily in one-two-three order. "Lefty" Anderson, Blue Sox twirler, made a more inauspicious début. With one out, he walked Comstock. Davidson's best was an infield out, short to first, Comstock stopping at second. Martin strolled to the plate, waved something white at mademoiselle and Connelly, who were seated in a box back of third base.

Then Martin stepped into the batter's box, promptly doubled off the left field wall, and Comstock raced home. Hildreth followed with a ground single over second, scoring Hick and old King Pandemonium reigned. Right in the middle of his noisy rule, Anderson tightened and, in a moment he whiffed Smithers for the third out.

In the fifth stanza the enemy compiled their first run, and the Raven team their third tally on Davidson's single, steal of second, and Martin's second hit, a single to right field. Into the ninth inning went the ball game with Cowherd breezing along easily and nothing startling having occurred, outside of Martin's jubilantly annexing his third safety. The score was three to one, Raven-hued, and the game looked as if it was in the old knapsack. Then something happened.

Two straight hits rang off Blue Sox bats, and Cowherd was derricked. Lanham took up the mound chores and promptly walked Baker and the bases were densely populated and none out. Schloss, the next batsman, hit a long sacrifice fly, and a run scampered over the plate after the catch. Then Nash, the invaders' shortstop, answered the silent prayers of thirty thousand tense, despairing fans by smiting into a fast

double play and the series was even Stephen.

McGee, being curious that evening, tried to persuade Connelly to tell how he was going to defeat Ambrose on the morrow. Hildreth likewise was interested. Connelly grinned and said something about letting the morrow tell the story. Martin, resplendent as an autumn setting sun, made the party a foursome a few minutes later, and Connelly suggested that they join Mademoiselle Lebanier on the mezzanine floor, a little suggestion that met with Hick's heartiest approval.

Arrived there, they came unobserved upon a couple, their backs to them, snuggled deep on a chaise longue, and each much interested in the other.

"Adorable little woman," a masculine voice desperately was saying, "I live only when you are near! You are the empress of my heart! I love you—love you—love you!"

The man tried to caress the woman and, failing, began showering feverish kisses upon her hands.

Connelly muttered something noisily, to give warning, and moved forward. Startled faces looked over the shoulders of the little French miss and Ambrose.

"I was just about to read mademoiselle's palm," explained Ambrose, in a highly annoyed voice.

Martin glared green-eyed at the Blue Sox pitching phenom. "Suppose you read your own and tell us how badly you're going to get walloped to-morrow!" he suggested.

Ambrose favored Martin with a contemptuous glance and laugh. "There is no need of wasting time in reading your horny hand, Mr. Hick Martin," he sneered. "All the world knows you'll churn the air four times as usual."

Martin started belligerently forward, and the Skipper seized him.

"Messieurs," shrilled mademoiselle with upraised hands, "because I am bored and m'sieu' would entertain, must we have ze awful combat of feesticuffs?"

"Lady," suggested Martin eagerly, "if you're bored, suppose you and me take in a show and afterward eat a sandwich and an ice-cream soda?"

McGee grabbed Martin by the shoul-

der and whirled him around. "Show—nothing!" the Skipper vehemently declared. "You're going to hit the hay in about another hour. There's a big job ahead of you to-morrow, young fellow, and I don't want to hear any alibis."

"M'sieu' McGee is right. You must all get ze healthful sleep for ze beeg game to-morrow." Mademoiselle Adrienne paused and continued somewhat excitedly: "M'sieu' Connelly and I will sit in ze same box to-morrow and see ze grand struggle. The one whose team wins I will go to show with at night. Is eet not level—square?"

Five minutes later Martin was in the main lobby, still loudly declaring that mademoiselle's proposition was more than square.

"Martin," asked Connelly, after the player had subsided somewhat, "since when did you become a Don Juan?"

Martin looked puzzled. "I don't know nothing about this Don John," he answered, "but I do know a Johnny on the spot. That's me—right here—to-morrow night!"

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST CHANCE.

THE Ravens took the field the next day for the crucial game with thirty-six thousand frenzied, pop-eyed fans assembled to see if they would win or wouldn't. Standing room was to be found only in front of the box office. Every seat was occupied except two of the choicest—Mademoiselle Adrienne's and Connelly's box seats back of third. Four national pastimers intensely wondered why. Mayfield and Owens were the battery for the home club, Ambrose and Gremmel for the Blue Sox.

Mayfield walked out to the mound, picked up the new ball rolled out to him, while the bugs stood and wildly cheered. Five preliminary balls he pitched to Tony Owens, a brief consultation followed, and they returned to their respective positions.

Lathrop, the Blue Sox lead-off man, stepped into the batter's box. Umpire Shanahan reversed his cap and adjusted his mask. Owens crouched, ready to catch. A flash of white sped plateward from a tangle of arms and legs.

"Strike!" shouted Shanahan with his right arm uplifted.

The game of games, whose stake was a league championship and the right to battle in baseball's golden classic, was under way.

Six innings passed by with one of the prettiest pitching duels of the season on exhibition. Mayfield was invincible, Ambrose unhittable. Both hurlers were equally good. Mayfield had ten strikeouts to his credit, so had Ambrose. Mayfield hadn't issued a pass to first, neither had his opponent.

Five Blue Sox batters had expired via the infield route and three skied to the outfield. Exactly the same fate had happened to eight Raven swatsmen. Then, with every one accepting an extra-inning battle as inevitable, up jumped the big break.

With two down in the seventh inning, Nash, who had treated the Ravens so kindly the day before, hit to Davidson, the home-club second baseman. Davidson mused it up for the first error of the game, and Nash was safe. A moment later Thurman put the ball on Nash, as he tried to steal second, and Holmes, umpiring the bases, waved him out, only to reverse his decision the next second, for Thurman had dropped the ball.

Carson was up. He was a notoriously weak sister with the ash. Mayfield, seeing him, eased up a bit, evidently forgetting a wise old baseball saying that weak sisters win weak-hitting games. Down the alley Mayfield pitched the ball, a ball devoid of everything but speed.

Carson promptly slammed it for the first safety of the game, a center-field single. Nash, his face aglow, crossed the plate to the accompaniment of thousands of heart-rending groans. Gremmel mutilated the ozone for the third out, but the mischief was done.

The crowd rose as the Ravens went to bat in the home half of the inning and frantically implored them to manufacture some runs. The home team rewarded the mad beseechings by weakly going out on three infield taps, and the Skipper renewed his clamoring for Connelly.

Ambrose, the first man up in the eighth

inning, was the passive victim of called strikes. Lathrop threw a mighty scare into the crowd by tripling to deep center. Mayfield rose nobly to the occasion, however, and forced Carr to foul out to Hildreth. Martin made a pretty running catch of Edmonston's bid for a hit, and the crowd had one of its few opportunities to applaud and cheer wildly.

Up came the Ravens in the last half of the eighth with the one, lone run of the game assuming the proportions of the Woolworth Building. Mayfield, the first batter, got an enthusiastic reception and then grounded to Ambrose and was easily thrown out.

Then Raven pennant prospects took on a more rosy tinge. The first man singled cleanly through short for the first Raven hit of the game. The second beat out a hit to third, and Raven hopes began soaring. Then the tide swung the other way. The next one, trying hard to kill the ball, got under it and knocked a fly to Carr, the Blue Sox keystone guardian. The fourth player flied to right field, and the little rally was nipped in the bud.

"Where, oh, where is Connelly!" fumed McGee, frantic at the inability of his men to score as the Ravens took the field for the last time.

Abruptly he stopped, bounded off the bench, and raced across the diamond like a banana-thieving ragamuffin with a cop in hot pursuit. Before a third-base box he halted and greeted Mademoiselle Adrienne and Connelly, who at last had condescended to put in an appearance.

In about two minutes the Skipper was back. "An auto accident," he briefly explained to Hildreth. "Truck ran into their taxi. Lucky to escape with their lives. Said we're also lucky that they got here in time."

Hildreth looked over to where Connelly was seated and saw Ambrose, bundled in his big sweater coat, leaning on the rail of the box and holding a highly animated conversation with mademoiselle.

"I suppose Connelly still promises to win the game for us," Hildreth sarcastically remarked, as he picked up his glove and moved toward first base.

McGee nodded. "He says watch for a grand display of fireworks in a few minutes."

Hildreth tried to be humorous, though he felt far from gay. "And it'll be just my luck," he growled, "to get hit by a skyrocket."

The foemen went out on seven pitched balls. As the white-uniformed athletes came in to the home dugout, the Skipper cut loose with a scathing broadside. Connelly and his promise were forgotten, McGee knew only that the pennant and its golden reward were fast slipping away, and he waxed venomously savage.

"Snap out of it!" he snarled. "What are you—men or paralytics? Going to let one run beat you out of big-series money? Go out and tear into this Ambrose! Hit him! He's only a perspiring human being like you and me. Get me a run or I'm going to ask waivers on every mother's son of you! Get me?"

Comstock marched to the plate with a grim and determined face while the crowd wildly entreated him to get on some way—only get on! Ambrose efficiently slipped a strike past him and was preparing to duplicate the feat, when an interruption came.

"M'sieu' Ambrose," a feminine voice shrilled across the diamond, "am I still the empress of your heart?"

Ambrose, in the middle of his wind-up, looked wonderingly in the direction of the inquiring voice. Such an astounding sight met his gaze that he cut loose with a wild pitch and hit Comstock in the back.

Comstock trotted to first base with Ambrose standing transfixed, still looking with unbelieving eyes at the amazing spectacle before him. Upon her seat stood Mademoiselle Adrienne, waving her hat in one hand and in the other a black wig. Close-cropped blond hair, parted in the center, adorned her uncovered head, and from between smiling lips protruded a fat cigar upon which she contentedly puffed away.

CHAPTER VI.

STRATEGY OF THE GAME.

"SHE'S a he!" gasped Martin, peering in surprise at the cigar-smoking person who sat beside Connelly in the box. "Mademoiselle—a female impersonator!" weakly cried the Skipper.

Hildreth, rubbing his eyes, said nothing; he was too astounded.

Davidson came to bat, with the crowd strangely quiet, wondering what it was all about. Gremmel, the Blue Sox catcher, walked out to Ambrose, trying to steady him, while out in left field the entire Blue Sox pitching corps were frantically warming up.

"Play ball!" ordered the umpire impatiently.

Across the diamond, from the box beside Connelly, a person propounded another query, this time in a deep, rumbling bass. "Gerald, dear, don't you love me any more?"

Ambrose tried to marshal his scattered senses, shut out the taunting voice, and obey the umpire's mandate, but fared badly.

"Ball one!" sang out Shanahan.

"Gerald, you're perfectly darling!" sang out the pseudo-mademoiselle in a high falsetto.

"Ball two!" cried the umpire.

"Please speak to me, Gerald!" imploringly requested a masculine voice.

"Ball three!" announced the arbiter behind the bat.

"Gerald, you wasn't so cold last night!" an anguished feminine voice announced to the world.

"Ball four!" remarked the czar of the diamond dispassionately.

"Take care, base deceiver!" coldly warned a voice in rumbling tones. "Love tan turn to hate!"

Two men were on, none were out, and Hick Martin was due at bat, with Hildreth following. An infernal din was making the welkin ring.

"Where's the batter?" bellowed Shanahan.

On the bench McGee discovered Martin, open-mouthed and gazing with fascinated eyes upon the antics of his late charmer. McGee gave Martin one swift comprehending glance and motioned Ballou, a utility outfielder, to go in and bat for Hick, still deep in a trance.

"Martin's sunk—through for the day!" McGee explained, his mouth close to Hildreth's ears. "He couldn't hit the side of a barn with a snow shovel since mademoiselle developed into the male sex." He turned to Ballou, eagerly

awaiting instructions. "Wait him out, Bill. He'll either hit or walk you!"

As Ballou strode plateward, McGee took Higgins' place on the first-base coaching line.

Ambrose, wild-eyed, confused, and wondering, learned the reason for the change of coaches when he wound up for his next pitch.

"I love you, mademoiselle! I love you!" shrieked Jerry McGee at Ambrose, kissing the back of his own hand the while. "I live only when you are near!"

Ambrose made a wild heave which eluded his sprawling catcher, and the base runners exultantly advanced to third and second. Out to the mound, anxious-faced, rushed the Blue Sox manager and infield. Around Ambrose they gathered and showered him with questions.

Hildreth walked over to the Skipper during the lull in hostilities, and McGee answered the query in his eyes.

"Don't worry!" the Raven pilot cried. "They won't jerk Ambrose. He's too vain to ask to be taken out. Because he has a string of nineteen straight victories to his credit, they think he's invincible. They still believe he'll tighten up and beat us. And here he is, miles high, playing with the eagles!"

The Blue Sox council broke up, the players showering Ambrose's back with pats of returned confidence. The pitching star remained on the mound.

"What did I tell you?" triumphantly asked McGee, and then he motioned to Ballou. "They're looking for a sacrifice fly, Bill, so we'll cross them up and play the squeeze. Lay it down. Shove the first pitch down to Ambrose. He won't know what to do with it when he gets it."

Ballou followed orders. Right to the unsuspecting Ambrose he pushed the ball, and that poor, bewildered pitching ace wildly fumbled it to the accompaniment of a feminine voice shrieking "Pretty Gerald!" and a coach off first base jumping repeatedly into the air.

Three—four—five times Ambrose tried to pick up the elusive pellet. Success at last crowned his frantic efforts. Comstock was crossing the plate with the tying run, and Ballou was only a few fast-flying steps away from the initial sack.

Ambrose's wild, roving gaze encountered the triumphant one of McGee and was lost.

"First!" was the Skipper's shrieking advice, and to first base the Blue Sox mound artist madly hurled the ball.

Schloss made a sensational leaping catch of the flying sphere as Davidson, following behind Comstock, slid across the plate. The next second twenty-five Raven ball players were tearing for the clubhouse to keep from being joyously torn asunder. The pennant race was over and from the dizzy topmost rung of the percentage ladder the Ravens were looking down.

CHAPTER VII.

MUCH TO THE GOOD.

THE conspicuous absentees that evening at the hostelry were Mademoiselle Adrienne, Ambrose, and Martin. Mademoiselle Lebanier, in the male attire and person of Robert Kilbane, had departed early from town for college and the studies that Connelly's wire had interrupted. Martin and Ambrose to all appearances had vanished from the earth.

Just before Kilbane's departure, McGee presented him and Connelly with checks, each reading for one thousand dollars. In addition, he promised them a player's share of the Ravens apportionment of the world's series receipts. This, the two men in question assured the Skipper, "wouldn't be hard to take." Probably this was why, later in the evening, Connelly enthusiastically began talking upon the subject nearest to his heart—psychology.

"The employment of psychology in the instance of Ambrose was far from being an intricate problem," the newspaper man said to his audience of two, Hildreth and McGee. "As the league race grew tighter and tighter and only three games from a close, the thought of how it would be possible to beat Ambrose, in the event the pennant hinged upon the last day's game, grew into an obsession with me. For I knew as well as the rest of the world that Ambrose, barring accidents, would surely hurl that titular game and, incidentally, pitch the game of his brilliant career.

"I had made Ambrose's acquaintance early in the season," Connelly went on, "and knew that he possessed an abnormal vanity regarding his handsome face, pitching ability, and prowess as a lady killer. Psychologically speaking, here was the vulnerability through which his downfall could be accomplished the speediest. But how? Suddenly I thought of Kilbane, my brother's roommate at college.

"A few weeks before, I had witnessed him make a big hit as *Mademoiselle Adrienne*, a flirtatious French actress, in their college play. Congratulating him after the play upon his finished performance, I laughingly told him that I might wire him and *Mademoiselle Adrienne* to come to the city and play a joke upon some male friends who were highly susceptible to the opposite sex. Kilbane replied that I need but send the wire and he would come. It would be the acid test of his histrionic ability and feminine make-up, and he would welcome the opportunity.

"Thinking of Kilbane and his finished female impersonation inspired the simple little plot of having Ambrose meet and make his usual fervent but insincere love to the supposedly chic Parisienne," Connelly continued. "Then at the hectic, last game have mademoiselle sensationally reveal herself as a masquerading male and—blooey, the big blowup, and bye-bye Ambrose!

"So I wired Kilbane to come, as you well remember, and upon his arrival took him to my home. There he donned his feminine war paint and apparel. Shortly afterward, Mademoiselle Adrienne Lebanier, of Paris, France, proudly escorted by myself, made an impressive entrance at the Hotel Magnificent, where the Blue Sox ball club were staying. There, with much gesticulating, she registered and was ceremoniously shown to her room. The rest you know."

Connelly paused to laugh. "And even then, as simple as our little scheme was, the unexpected stepped in twice and almost doomed us to failure. The first instance was Martin's becoming madly smitten with mademoiselle's charms. Something which was wholly unlooked for, but which, luckily, didn't work any

harm. The second nearly fatal happening was the auto accident which almost prevented our attending the ball game and staging the little psychological act.

"And, Mr. McGee," concluded Connelly, "please accept my fervent thanks for the prominent part you played in bringing it to a triumphant conclusion. Your taking the coaching line in the ninth inning and helping complete Ambrose's demoralization and consequent ascension, by graphically reviewing his love-making of the night before, was a masterful stroke of genius. It clearly demonstrated you to be what I had always thought—a brilliant student of psychology."

"Huh!" the Skipper grunted unenthusiastically. "I suppose, hearing that, I should weep tears of joy, but the only ones I have on tap right now are sad, bitter ones. Here the world's series is only three days away, and the only position I can see for Hick Martin is to play him on the bench. Your French mamselle not only stole his batting eye, but broke his heart as well."

"Martin—heart-broken?" asked Connelly. "With mademoiselle leaving him three thousand dollars heart balm?"

"Three thousand dollars heart balm?" blurted out Hildreth.

"Sure, Mike!" answered Connelly. "That's the least amount a Raven ball laborer will draw down in the big clash even if they are on the losing club. And who made it possible? No one else but Mademoiselle Adrienne Lebanier!"

"And that's not saying anything about the nice six-dollar lady's handkerchief that she also gave Martin to win that second game for us," he went on. "No; I can't see any reason for Hick Martin to nurse a broken heart. In comparison to poor old Ambrose, he's setting on top of the world!"

"You mean a bench," the Skipper contradicted. "A world's series bench."

"Well," returned Connelly, "I'll say this. If you bench Martin during the series, you're going to make one big mistake. I've studied that boy and figured him this way. He'll spend the next few days laughing off his little humorous affair of the heart and then cultivate a grouch as deep as the Grand Cañon and

take it out on Scout pitching; that is, if you don't make the mistake of benching him."

And .473—Martin's batting average in the world's series—eloquently attested that Connelly knew his man and that McGee didn't make the big mistake. For after two days of unrestrained hilarity, that's just what this big, simple son of the tall and uncut up and batted in a series which the Ravens captured in the shortest possible time, in four straight games.

How did this story strike you? A few words about it, if you will be good enough to write them and send them to the editor. We ask you to say, without reserve, just what you think of it. And in the same letter, please give us your opinion of TOP-NOTCH in general.

Ready for Results

THE diner, a rather seedy-looking man, was enjoying himself. He had been seated some three-quarters of an hour, and had sampled of the restaurant's best.

"Waiter," he called, "will you bring me the best dessert you have?"

The dish was obtained, placed before the customer and consumed. Then once more he raised his voice and called:

"Waiter, bring me some coffee, please."

The bill steadily mounted up, but still the seedy one called the waiter for first this and then that.

At last he lighted a cigar and sat back.

"Waiter," he called, "bring——"

"Yes, sir," said the waiter. "Your bill?"

"No," came the languid answer; "bring a policeman. I can't pay the bill."

The Fire Eater

DURING a vaudeville performance there was a sudden commotion at the back of the stage, and the manager dashed behind.

"Look here," he said, "what the deuce is all this row about?"

A scenshifter smiled broadly. "D'ye know the magician who eats fire?" he said. "Well, he's just put the wrong end of a cigar in his mouth!"



White Desert-

By Claude Rister-



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

A SKY CLEW.

THE silence of the Western town of Hellgap was broken by a quiet voice. "Crawdad," announced "Dreamy Gus" Mullett, sheriff of Hellgap, "some-thin's happened."

Crawdad Williams looked up, his thin face alight with interest. "What's happened, an' how yuh know it has?" he asked ambiguously.

Dreamy Gus nodded toward the desert. "Rider comin', hell bent for election."

Crawdad's protuberant black eyes riveted upon a form that was bobbing along beneath a veil of saffron-colored dust. "Well, what of it? I don't see nothin' strange in a puncher's breezin' his cayuse into town on a Saturday afternoon."

"That stands to be either Garn Sykes or 'Uncle Billy' West," Dreamy Gus went on thoughtfully. "Ain't nobody else prospectin' th' desert right now."

He sat on a box, his chubby body propped against the trunk of the big cottonwood that shaded his office. Crawdad was squatted upon the doorstep, his long arms looped over his knees. A stranger in Hellgap would scarcely have guessed them to be two of the best-known characters in the borderland. Dreamy Gus Mullett's astonishing proclivity for solving the most baffling riddles was the talk of the desert country; and Crawdad Williams was credited with possessing the quickest gun hand in all the Southwest.

"I bet six bits somethin's happened to Uncle Billy West," prophesied Crawdad. He was a born pessimist.

"What makes yuh say that?" inquired Dreamy Gus.

"Well, yuh know 'Doggy' Walton, that tramp from th' East, has been hostile ever since Uncle Billy plugged 'im in their fight at th' Oasis last fall."

"I know he's done a lot of talkin' about what he was goin' to do. A man allus brags when he's tight, an' Doggy usually is. We mustn't take his bowwowin' serious—still, somethin's wrong. Look at this." Dreamy Gus handed his deputy a folded slip of paper. "Would have showed yuh that sooner, but ain't seen yuh for a coupla days."

"I been following what looked like a lead in th' express-robbery case—but it petered out."

A glance at Crawdad's face now would have sufficed to enlighten the most casual observer as to how he had come by his quaint sobriquet. As he bent over the note, his protuberant black eyes and thin, drooping mustache gave to him a look that was peculiarly suggestive of the little crustacean for which he had been nicknamed. He had, too, a habit of wrinkling his nose, which caused his whiskers to twiddle like the feelers of a crawfish.

"Huh!" he grunted, and blinked at the open note. "Wrote in Mex. What's th' idy?"

"To keep th' messenger, an' mebbe others, from readin' it, I reckon. Me an' Uncle Billy's th' only ones around

Hellgap, excepting Mexies, that savvies th' lingo."

"What does it say?"

Dreamy Gus took the note and read:

DEAR GUS: Leaving shack midnight tonight. Ought to reach Hellgap before sun-up. Sec me sure. Important.

Yours, UNCLE BILLY.

Crawdad was puzzled. "Now what yuh reckon's eatin' that ol' desert rat?"

Dreamy Gus did not answer. His battered old Stetson was tipped forward until the brim almost touched his funny, knoblike nose. His half-closed eyes were languidly following the course of a buzzard which was sliding across the dull-gray dome of the sky. He sang dolefully:

Oh, bury me no-o-ot on th' lone prairie-e-e-e
Where wild coyo-o-otes may howl c'er me-e-e!

"Where'd yuh get it?" Crawdad inquired, tapping the note with a lean forefinger.

"Tontoc handed it to me an hour ago. Should have delivered it last night, but a bottle of 'Tige' Dolton's 'moon' sorter dimmed his memory."

"Ain't Uncle Billy showed up yet?"

"No."

"An' didn't Tontoc give yuh no details?"

"Yeh; he run into Uncle Billy over in Devil's Cañon. Th' old fellow seemed nervous an' worried, Tontoc said. He scribbled that note an' told Tontoc he'd give 'im two dollars to see that I got it—private!"

Crawdad's eyes sought once more the form of the flying rider. "Danged if it ain't Garn!" he exclaimed. "An' he shore is givin' that willow tail th' steel."

Garn Sykes jerked his foam-flecked mount to an abrupt halt and dismounted in a cloud of dust. For a moment he stood, staring stupidly. His checkered shirt and sombrero and even the stubble of beard that covered his heavy jaws were flecked with dust. His hard blue eyes were bloodshot. Dreamy Gus fished a peanut from his vest pocket, cracked it, and waited in calm silence for the man of the desert to speak.

Old Crawdad Williams, however, was blessed with no such powers of self-restraint. "Criminy crickets, Garn!" he

burst out. "Say somethin'! Don't stand there pantin' like a hot hen!"

Sykes licked his lips—lips that were colorless and sore from habitual moistening. "He's gone!" he croaked. "My pardner!"

Crawdad's nose wrinkled; his whiskers twiddled.

"Tell us about it, Garn," Dreamy Gus prompted casually. Again his languid gaze was following a black speck that was sliding across the dull-gray dome of the sky.

Sykes explained that Uncle Billy, his partner, had been acting very queerly of late. The old man had appeared furtive and uneasy, he declared, as if living in constant fear of some invisible menace.

"Last night," he went on, "we was settin' outside th' shack smokin', when suddenlike Uncle Billy announces he's turnin' in. I notice that before he goes inside he stands in th' door a minute, lookin' toward White Desert like he half expects somethin' to jump out an' holler: 'Boo!' Later I get to thinkin' about how queer he's acted, so I leans over an' peeks through th' window, an', sheriff, what do yuh reckon I saw?"

"What?" prompted Crawdad.

"Uncle Billy, down on his hunkers, lookin' under his bunk. His eyes were bulged out. His face was pale. I was about to speak to 'im, when he straightened up, blowed out th' light, an' crawled in bed.

"I dropped off to sleep," Sykes went on. "Somethin' woke me. I stuck my head in at th' door an' called. No answer. Then I went inside an' lighted a candle. Uncle Billy was gone!"

"Well I'll be dad-jiggered!" exclaimed Crawdad.

"I peeked under th' bunk," continued Garn Sykes. "Nothin' there. Th' window was up. I leaned out an' listened. No sound, except th' jowl of a lobo. Th' sky was hazy; th' moon a dirty ball that give no light; there was a smell of sandstorm in th' air.

"I hunted everywhere, at th' mine, through th' bushes an' gulches. Th' sandstorm busted about midnight, drivin' me in. This morning I made another search, but found nothing. Then I figured I'd better see you, sheriff."

"Yuh done right," Crawdad assured him. "Me an' Gus has cleaned up every case that's come our way, except that express robbery a month ago, an' dad-burn my hide we ain't through with that yet, eh, Gus?"

These words came lo-o-ow, from th' die-ying
bo-o-y,
Oh, bury me no-o-ot on th' lone prairie-e-e-e!

Dreamy Gus crooned the words softly, as if he had not heard a syllable of Sykes' strange story. His languid blue eyes were still turned to the desert sky.

In spite of his apparent unconcern, however, the sheriff of Hellgap was thinking swiftly, methodically, accurately. Had Uncle Billy West at last reached the rainbow's end? Like every other habitual treasure seeker, he was full of wild yarns concerning lost mines and hidden gold. Always he would declare with a wise nod of his grizzled old head that he knew the approximate location of these hidden treasures, and meant to go unearthen them—some day. A practical, straight-thinking prospector in most cases, he was yet ready to believe almost any kind of an incredible story that concerned treasure.

Dreamy Gus at last got up and, without a word, went into his office. When he reappeared, he was buckling on his gun. "Crawl into your leggin's, Crawdad," he directed his deputy. "We're ridin' for White Desert."

"I shore hope we find 'im," Sykes said earnestly. "Maybe he'll tell you what's on his mind."

Dreamy Gus shook his head. "I'm afraid Uncle Billy will never tell anybody anything again."

Sykes paled. "Sheriff, yuh don't mean that—"

"Dead!" Dreamy Gus solemnly declared.

Crawdad's nose wiggled. His whiskers wiggled with it.

Sykes stood like a frozen image, staring at the sheriff with horrified eyes. "Dead!" he repeated. "How yuh know that?"

Dreamy Gus pointed to the sky. "Buzzards," he explained simply. "I been seein' 'em pass here for th' last hour."

CHAPTER II.

THE SHERIFF'S DECISION.

IN solemn silence the three men headed for the desert. An inquiry at the Oasis had elicited from Tige Morris the information that Doggy Walton had not been seen in the Oasis for the past two days—a surprising disclosure indeed.

They met Doggy, however, riding from the direction of White Desert.

Dreamy Gus halted, blocking the trail with his horse. "Which way, Doggy?" he casually inquired.

"The Oasis, I reckon," answered the drunkard in a surly tone.

Crawdad rode forward, leaned from his saddle, and thrust his face to within a few inches of Doggy's. "Mebbe you better tell us where you been th' last coupla days!"

Doggy gave him a quick, searching glance. "I—I got a claim," he offered.

"How inter-estin'! Suppose we ride back an' have a look at your little prospect!"

"I'm not showing it, and that's final. I've got a right to keep my location secret if I want to."

"I guess you ain't heard about Uncle Billy West?"

Doggy's bleared, watery eyes opened wider. A frightened look flashed across his loose face. "No. What about 'im?"

"He's dead! Murdered, mebbe."

Doggy threw up one arm as if to ward a blow. His big form wilted. "It wasn't me," he whimpered, turning a horrified countenance to the sheriff. "I wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Ain't accused yuh, have I?"

"No; not exactly, but—everybody knows I've done a lot of wild talking while drunk—things I didn't mean at all."

"I'm inclined to believe 'im, sheriff," Sykes said coldly. "He ain't got th' sand to kill a man."

"You come along with us, Doggy," ordered Dreamy Gus. "We might need you to he'p us bring th' body in."

Doggy paled. "Good lord, sheriff! I don't want to see him! My nerves are all busted anyway!"

In spite of his protests, Doggy was forced to accompany them.

"He done it, all right," Crawdad confided to his chief. "Him bustin' out like he did was a dead give-away. He'll wilt an' gabble th' whole story before we get back."

Dreamy Gus disregarded this prophecy. He was looking at the flock of buzzards that eddied in the sky. "Funny them critters don't light," he mused.

An hour passed. They skirted the base of a lone hill until they came to its south slope. Here Dreamy Gus drew rein, halting his companions with an up-raised hand. Before them, reaching away toward the blasted Brimstone Mountains, was a stretch of dazzling white sand. Upon this dreary waste, fifty yards from the base of the hill, was the withered carcass of a steer. Near it lay a man.

"My pardner!" said Sykes, speaking in a gragic whisper.

They rode to the body of the man.

"Been dead a right smart while," announced Crawdad, as he straightened up from examining the body.

Dreamy Gus remained squatted beside the still form, studying it in silence.

"Plain case of suicide," Crawdad went on, pointing to the haft of a knife which protruded from the old prospector's left armpit. "Whoever done that was bound to leave tracks, an' they ain't none here except Uncle Billy's an' ours. Wonder why he didn't use his six-gun?"

Dreamy Gus reached out and pulled into view an empty holster. He was very serious when he stood up. The vague blue eyes, set wide on either side of a ludicrous, knoblike nose, were clouded. "Boys," he said slowly. "This ain't no case of suicide. It's murder."

CHAPTER III.

MARKS OF BULLETS.

CRAWDAD'S eyes almost popped from his head. Doggy gulped audibly. Sykes stared, then dropped his face into his hands and moaned.

When he looked up there was an expression upon his dust-streaked visage which was terrible to see. "I'll get th' snake that done it," Sykes threatened. His red eyes searched Doggy's face.

The drunkard did not meet his gaze.

Crawdad found his tongue. "Gus, you're as nutty as a peach-orchard shote! How could he a-been murdered when they ain't but one trail leadin' here?"

"Dunno," Dreamy Gus admitted simply, "but I aim to find out."

"Maybe th' knife was throwed; or maybe he was stabbed out yonder some-ers an' staggered along this far before he fell," suggested Garn Sykes.

"Why, yes; that might be!" Doggy spoke up so suddenly that the three other men turned on him in surprise. When he found their concentrated gaze upon him, he bit his lip and turned away.

"He couldn't of walked more than three steps with that knife in his heart," Dreamy Gus argued. "It's drove clean to th' hilt, which proves it wasn't throwed. Anyway, they ain't no other tracks near. I seem to be th' only one that noticed Uncle Billy's right wrist is broke."

The three other men came quickly to his side.

"Maybe he fell on it," suggested Doggy.

"No; his arms are stretched out above his head."

"Maybe he didn't make that trail," suggested Crawdad. "Maybe somebody brought 'im here— Well, danged if I know what could of become of 'em then."

"They're Uncle Billy's tracks all right," said Doggy. "They even show where those three hobnails are missing in the right sole and the tiny worn hole in the left."

Dreamy Gus gazed speculatively at the carcass of the steer, beside which the old prospector's body lay. The carcass was but a wrinkled hide through which, here and there, showed bleached bones. Evidently the steer had died in the summertime when the extreme heat had routed the buzzards from the desert, and its body had been cured by sunshine and dry winds.

"Now I wonder," mused Dreamy Gus, "if it's coincidence, him bein' so near that carcass, or does it have somethin' to do with th' murder?"

"Murder! Why do you insist that it was murder?" Doggy cried irritably.

"Right wrist is broke, ain't it? Well, he couldn't possibly have held a knife in his left hand an' stabbed himself in th'

left armpit, leavin' th' blade pointin' down. Besides, there's several little things I ain't mentioning right now."

"An' now I sabe about that six-gun," Crawdad put in. "Somebody knocked it out of his hand, breakin' his wrist, then stabbed 'im."

"Which shows your head ain't filled with pumpkin seed entire, Crawdad," Dreamy Gus said dryly.

Pleased with such flattery from his chief, Crawdad turned his bulbous black eyes upon Doggy Walton. "Doggy," he accused, "things are goin' to look mighty dreary for you unless you show us that claim of yours"

Doggy hesitated. "I haven't a claim, exactly," he admitted, at last. "I was just prospecting for one."

"Where?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular. I don't know where all I went. I'm not very familiar with the Brimstones."

Suddenly Sykes dropped upon one knee, his eyes staring. "Look!" he cried, pointing to the haft of the knife which protruded from the old prospector's side. "That's Tontoc's frog sticker, I swear!"

"Tontoc, huh?" Crawdad growled.

"Yes; he threatened my pardner's life once. Uncle Billy always believed that Growling Bear, Tontoc's father, knew where there was a lost mine. After Growling Bear died an' was given a white man's burial by his educated son, Uncle Billy got hold of a rumor that Growling Bear had made a chart of the mine's location an' that th' plat had been placed in his grave, along with his other possessions. My pardner approached Tontoc with a proposition to open th' grave. Of course Tontoc was shocked. He swelled up like a poisoned pup. Told Uncle Billy to hit th' trail an' to never come back unless he was huntin' trouble."

"Yes; I heard about that," Dreamy Gus admitted. "But it was all fixed up between 'em. Tontoc convinced Uncle Billy th' rumor was a fish story, an' they got to be th' best of friends."

"So you think!" returned Sykes. "Uncle Billy was plumb loco when it come to matters of treasures an' lost mines. One night last week I saw him climb through th' window, shoulder his pick an' shovel, an' light out. I figured

he couldn't sleep because of his secret worry an' meant to do a little work at th' mine. Next morning I saw he hadn't. This put me to thinking, so I rode over to old Growling Bear's grave, an' sure enough it had been opened, then filled again."

"But it was Tontoc who give me th' first hint somethin' was wrong," objected Dreamy Gus. "Here, look at this."

Sykes glanced at the note which the Indian had delivered to the sheriff that morning. "Purty slick Indian," was his comment. "He didn't spend no four years in college for nothin'. I don't know Mex, but I do know my pardner's scribblin', an' I know he didn't write that note."

"He didn't!" exclaimed Crawdad. "Yuh sure?"

"Pos'tive."

Dreamy Gus apparently had not heard this last remark. He was bending over a spot where something had splashed up the sand. "Bullet marks," he grunted. "Now I know why them buzzards ain't lighted. Somebody's been shootin' to keep 'em away." His eyes searched the side of the hill. "Uh-huh! There he is now, over on th' far slope."

Perhaps four hundred yards away was a man, perched high upon a point of rock. Across his knees was a rifle. Near him stood an alert pinto pony.

"Th' Indian!" snarled Sykes. His fingers trailed across the butt of his gun.

"Tontoc!" exclaimed Crawdad. "Funny he didn't come down to see what had happened."

"Looks suspicious, doesn't it?" Doggy put in.

"Here he comes now," said Garn Sykes. His eyes narrowed.

"You fellers keep yer pants on," advised Dreamy Gus. "I been sheriff for a right smart while, an' I aims to keep on bein' her. Th' first hombre that horns in gets hurt. Sabe?"

CHAPTER IV.

A PUZZLING PROBLEM.

TONTOC was a stalwart figure. Despite his college education, he dressed in the same fashion as did the older members of his tribe. He went straight to

the body on the ground and knelt beside it. When he stood up, his face was very serious.

Dreamy Gus leaned against his horse's forelegs and placidly cracked a peanut. "All right, Tontoc," he prompted. "Le's have it."

"There is but little to tell," the Indian replied, speaking very good English. "I was returning from Hellgap, noticed the buzzards, and rode to the top of the hill to look about. It was from that point I saw this." He pointed to the body.

"Wasn't yuh sorter curious to know what had happened?"

"Naturally. But I reasoned that by coming here I might destroy some clew. I thought it best to let you find him, just as he lay. That's why I came no nearer than the bottom of the hill."

"How'd yuh know we'd find 'im?"

"My eyes are keen. I had seen your party coming."

"Garn Sykes was tellin' me you an' Uncle Billy had a spat once."

Tontoc's face became an expressionless copper mask. "Yes; I know, the fable of the treasure chart. That story was circulated by a fellow who hates me and hoped to bring about a clash between Uncle Billy West and me. I would have been no match for the prospector in a gun fight."

His fathomless eyes stared straight into the bleared orbs of Doggy Walton. Doggy thrust his hands into his pockets and turned away.

"As for Sykes," Tontoc went on contemptuously, "he doesn't like me either. I thrashed him not long ago, for sneering at me. I had guessed my name might be mentioned here. That's why I came no nearer than the base of the hill. My trail leading here might have been hard to explain. You were riding so fast that I knew this must be an unusual case."

"It's a danged lot harder to explain why they ain't no trail!" Sykes put in. "Likewise, how it happens he was killed with your sticker."

Tontoc's eyes became points of fire. "I lost the knife two weeks ago," he said quietly. "Evidently some one found it."

Traveling in ever-widening circles, they made a thorough search of the vicin-

ity. They found no trail save their own, Tontoc's, and the one which led to the body. That of the Indian pointed straight toward Hellgap, bearing out his statement that he had come no nearer than the foot of the hill—fifty yards away.

Doggy had suggested that the murderer might have walked in Uncle Billy's tracks, but an inspection of the trail proved that this had not been done. The tracks were clean-cut. The little party followed them to where they were lost in the rocky bed of an arroyo that cut the plain half a mile to the west of the lone hill.

Leaving Doggy behind to guard the body of Uncle Billy, the four other men set out for the prospectors' cabin in the Brimstones.

"Gus, you're plumb loco," Crawdad chided the sheriff. "Don't yuh know if Doggy's guilty he'll hit th' grit soon as we're outa sight?"

"Uh-huh! Then all we'll have to do is round 'im up."

It was late afternoon by the time they reached the hut in the mountains. Near the door were some tracks which had been made by the unshod feet of a horse. Dreamy Gus dismounted and inspected them closely. Tontoc watched him, a smile flickering about his thin lips.

Dreamy Gus squinted one eye and looked up quizzically. "All right, Tontoc," he drawled. "What about it?"

"Your eyes are keen," was the quiet reply. "Yes; my pony made them. I stopped here for a drink yesterday, but found no one at home. Later I came upon Uncle Billy over in Devil's Cañon. It was then that he gave me the note which I delivered to you."

Sykes opened his lips to speak, but Dreamy Gus silenced him with a look.

They made a thorough search of the shack and its environs, but if anything further that might offer a clew was noticed, no one mentioned such a fact to his companions.

"No use wastin' time here," Dreamy Gus at last declared. "Crawdad, you an' Garn take a pick an' shovel an' look after Uncle Billy. Me an' Tontoc's goin' for a little ride. Meet us at th' Oasis to-night."

With these parting instructions he waddled to his horse. Followed by Tontoc, who neither hesitated nor asked questions, he rode away into the hills.

Sykes scratched his whiskered jaws and looked after them curiously. "Now where yuh reckon he's goin' with that Indian?"

Crawdad shook his head. "No tellin'. Yuh never can figure Gus."

CHAPTER V.

BURNING HORSESHOES.

THE Oasis was seething with its usual Saturday-night crowd. Póker chips rattled; glasses clinked; an occasional, "Well, here's lookin' at yuh, cowboy," sounded from the direction of the bar.

Crawdad sat humped over a card table. Sykes was at his left elbow. Doggy had not strayed from the bar since first he had breasted it two hours before.

It was ten o'clock before Dreamy Gus parted the swinging doors of the Oasis. At his heels stood Tontoc. Crawdad was about to nudge Sykes, but Dreamy Gus beckoned mysteriously, then disappeared.

When Crawdad had joined him outside, Dreamy Gus drew his deputy into the shadows and whispered a few words of instruction.

Crawdad blinked. "What yuh want me to do that for?"

"Never mind; just do it. You better mosey inside. I'll follow in a minute."

Old Crawdad scarcely had resumed his seat at the card table when Dreamy Gus pushed into the Oasis and waddled toward the bar. Tontoc folded his arms and took station beside the door. Sykes looked at the Indian and licked his lips like a hungry lobo.

"Strawberry pop," ordered Dreamy Gus, as one run-down boot clumped upon the length of windmill pipe that served as a rail.

Tige Morris, a squat bulldog of a man, served him with alacrity, grinning as he opened the big ice box. Cowboys flicked away cigarettes and straightened up. Men at gaming tables turned and regarded the sheriff with interest. A subdued murmur ran around the room.

"Pop! He's drinkin' strawberry pop! That means business! Never drinks red-

eye when he's workin'! Look at th' dust on his chaps!" were the whispers that could be heard.

Dreamy Gus piled a handful of peanuts upon the bar and turned to face the room. Men kicked back their chairs and crowded about him. He had a story to tell. There was no doubt of it now.

Dreamy Gus munched a peanut and studied each of the bronzed faces before him. His lazy blue eyes were expressionless. Obviously these men had not heard the news. Crawdad had been discreet.

At last Dreamy Gus spoke: "Boys, Uncle Billy West is dead."

An awed silence followed which was so intense that the ticking of the sheriff's big watch could be heard distinctly.

"An' I'm goin' to kill th' snake that done it!" Garn Sykes' harsh, dry voice at last broke the stillness. He elbowed his way to the sheriff's side and stood glaring at the crowd with cold, red-rimmed eyes. His face was pale beneath its stubble of beard. His glance went to the door.

Tontoc stared back at him defiantly.

A buzz of conversation ran around the room. There were surprised oaths, exclamations, an exchange of wondering glances; then Dreamy Gus was fairly buried under an avalanche of questions.

"Hold yer hosses, men," he admonished them, holding up a hand for silence. Turning to Sykes, he said: "You tell 'em about it."

Sykes wet his lips, then spoke in a voice that rasped like rusty iron. He recounted the story which he had given Dreamy Gus and Crawdad that morning, supplementing it with a recital of how the sheriff's party had returned to White Desert to find Uncle Billy there. Sykes' partner had been murdered, so Dreamy Gus had said, with no tracks near the body save those which the old prospector himself had made.

Again there were surprised exclamations.

"Then it wasn't murder!" declared one grizzled rancher. "How could it 'a' been? Not even a ghost could cross White Desert without leavin' a trail."

"No; it was murder," contended Dreamy Gus. "I'm positive of that, though I ain't sayin' yet how I know."

"Back-tracked, eh?" asked Tige Morris, with a wise lifting of his bushy eyebrows.

"No. It was a single trail. Nobody had stepped in them tracks. I don't know how th' murderer come an' went without leavin' a trail. I do know, though, that Uncle Billy was murdered, an' th' hound that done it is in this room right now, lookin' at me."

Each man looked, half accusingly, at his neighbor.

Doggy pawed his way along the bar and halted, swaying, at the sheriff's elbow. "Well, ye don' need think I done it," he said.

"Who was it?" Sykes demanded hoarsely. "Just point 'im out to me." He crouched, his right hand poised over his gun.

The crowd held its breath. Dreamy Gus set his empty pop bottle upon the bar and wiped his lips on his sleeve.

"Criminy Christmas, sheriff!" one lank cow-puncher exploded. "Say somethin' before I bust! Who was it?"

Dreamy Gus shook his head. "Ain't got th' least idy," he replied simply.

The crowd caught its breath.

"Since everybody around Hellgap's here to-night, I figger th' murderer's bound to be on hand," Dreamy Gus went on.

"Maybe *el cuchillero* ees in Mexico by thees time," suggested a grinning Mexican.

"No; he didn't pull out. That would have been a confession of guilt, and he knows danged well I'd have brought 'im back. Besides, there's a posse from up-country ridin' th' line right now, lookin' for th' trail of rustlers."

"Maybe a señorita pushed that knife," offered Tige Morris, "if you're sure it was murder. For instance, th' one he made love to, then deserted, over in Mexico last year."

"Blah!" exclaimed Crawdad. "You know as well as I do that story was circulated just to pester Uncle Billy. That ol' desert rat never had a gal in his life."

Dreamy Gus raked a handful of peanut shells from the bar. "Me an' Tontoc's been doin' a little trailin'," he drawled. "Had to come in when it got

dark. We'll be ridin' out again early in th' mornin' so I reckon I'd better turn in. Good night, everybody." With a sleepy yawn, he waddled toward the door.

Crawdad elbowed his way to the spot vacated by Dreamy Gus. "Say, Garn," he ventured, "do you reckon them hairs could have been a clew?"

He shut a sidewise glance at Doggy, but apparently the drunkard had not heard his remark.

"Hairs?" Garn Sykes repeated wonderingly. "What hairs?"

"Them Uncle Billy had clutched in his right hand. Didn't yuh notice 'em? I saw 'em when I wrapped th' body in my saddle blanket. I didn't mention it at th' time, because I was figgerin' it a case of suicide, in spite of what Gus had said, and I 'lowed Uncle Billy had pulled them hairs from his own head in his agony. Guess I was mistaken, though. I'll speak to Gus about it in th' mornin'."

"Then he'll likely open the grave," mused Doggy. He appeared almost sober now.

"Yeh; th' case is as good as solved once Gus gets evidence like that."

As soon as he could do so without attracting undue attention, Crawdad slipped from the Oasis and hurried to the sheriff's office. He found Dreamy Gus engaged in conversation with Tontoc. Dreamy Gus dismissed the Indian as Crawdad approached.

"I reckon that'll be all, Tontoc. Much obliged for your help."

Crawdad gazed after the retreating Indian for a moment, then turned to his chief. "Now, Gus," he began, "le's me an' you get down to bed rock. I spoke about the hairs as you told me. But you know as well as I do Uncle Billy didn't have no hairs clutched in his hand."

"Of course not; but th' hound that knifed 'im don't know it."

Crawdad considered. "An' yuh figger he'll go back to remove that clew?"

"Well, we got 'im scared, anyway. He'll probably stampede to-night."

"Who yuh think done it?"

"You'll see purty soon." Dreamy Gus delighted in drawing out a drama of this kind to its very fullest.

"Well, smart alec, if yuh know who it was, why don't yuh go ahead an' arrest 'im?"

"Because I want 'im to lead me to a certain treasure."

"Treasure! Then it must be—Gus, yuh don't mean Tontoc?"

The sheriff clutched Crawdad's arm. "Look!" he whispered. "There he goes now, streakin' it for White Desert."

Crawdad stretched his long neck inquisitively. His whiskers twiddled. Vaguely discernible through the pearl-gray moonlight moved the form of a horseman. "Who is it?" he whispered.

Dreamy Gus ignored the question. "Stamped in, just as I figured he would. Means to grab th' gold an' clear out."

"Dang it all, Gus! I could choke you! Who is it?"

"We mustn't follow 'im. A hunted man allus looks behind. We'll take th' lower trail. Fork your cayuse, Crawdad. We got to burn up some horseshoes."

With a muffled snort of rage, Crawdad flung himself to the saddle and spurred after the vanishing form of his chief.

CHAPTER VI. IN THE SHADOWS.

LEAVING their horses in the shadow of a great monolith of sandrock, Dreamy Gus and Crawdad climbed the lone hill and sat down beneath a cedar, a few feet from the newly made grave.

Minutes slipped by. Neither man spoke. The utter loneliness of the scene awed them to silence. Below stretched the desert, lifeless, silent, mysterious. Far to the north a sprinkle of lights marked the location of Hellgap. Once Dreamy Gus essayed, very softly, the notes of a cowboy dirge.

Crawdad spurred him in the shins. "Hog tie that, yuh blamed coyote!" he growled. "Ain't it lonesome enough here without you howlin'?"

Soon, upon the vague sea of waste which stretched away to the north, the shadowy form of a horseman appeared, bobbing along like a bit of driftwood upon a moonlit sea. A quarter of a mile from the lone hill the rider took black bulk which was the Brimstones. off at a tangent, heading toward that

"I thought so," whispered Dreamy Gus. "He ain't got th' sand to come near this place. He's headin' for Devil's Cañon. We can beat 'im by takin' a short cut."

Before mounting his horse he stood for a moment, his foot in the stirrup, looking back over his shoulder. "Crawdad," he said, "my part of th' work's about done. Here's where you come in. Ready?"

Crawdad pulled out his forty-five and spun the cylinder. "Ready," he announced, and shoved the gun back into its holster. "But dang it all, Gus, who am I goin' up against?"

Dreamy Gus had swung himself to the saddle and was loping away toward the south.

Like specters of the desert they crossed the sandy waste and entered the Brimstones. A sharp climb; a breathless ride along a narrow ledge, then down again; a swift lope up that black gorge which was Devil's Cañon; and they came at last to a small wooded valley. Here they concealed their horses in a clump of mountain cedars, and Dreamy Gus led the way to a ragged hole which opened into the face of a cliff.

"We better go in an' wait," the sheriff whispered. "Following a man into a cave is a heap dangerous."

Holding a lighted match in his cupped hands, he guided the way along the cavern. A hundred questions were struggling at Crawdad's lips, but he did not ask them. What was the use?

They turned to the left and halted. Dreamy Gus struck his third match. They stood within a gloomy underground chamber. It was like a mighty assembly hall wherein the ruler of the spirit world sat in judgment over the dead.

"Here's where it happened," Dreamy Gus said in a low tone.

Crawdad gulped as if the invisible presence of Awe stood at his very elbow. His Adam's apple scooted up and down his neck like a mouse running along a pole. "What happened?" he queried, though in his heart he knew the answer to the question.

"Th' murder. Tontoc found this place to-day—trails like a bloodhound. Uncle Billy had brought his burro here

to pack th' treasure on, but instead it carried him away. Yuh see, Crawdad, he was killed here an' his body placed on White Desert."

Crawdad stared. "How yuh know that?"

"Th' body didn't lay to th' sand natural. There were places where I could see little angles of light under it, which proved it was rigid when put there. Then, too, I noticed that in spite of th' fact th' whole left side of his shirt was red, there wasn't th' sign of a stain on th' sand."

"Lordy! What loonies th' rest of us was for not noticin' that!" groaned Crawdad. Then he pondered for a second. "But, Gus, there wasn't any trail except Uncle Billy's! What about that?"

"Hide yourself, pronto! Here comes our man!"

No sooner had they taken shelter behind a mass of fallen stone than hasty footsteps sounded upon the cavern floor. The man entered the subterranean chamber in which they crouched, waiting. A tense silence followed; then a match was struck. A flood of yellow light swept the shadows into the crevices.

After a moment Crawdad ventured to peep from his shelter. He saw two candles burning on either side of a great gash in the cavern wall. Of the man, nothing was visible save one slanted leg. He was delving deep into the niche. An eruption of stones and dirt showed that he was uncovering something. The stones ceased to fly. The man backed into view, clutching an armful of buckskin bags. Now across Crawdad's brain flashed the truth. Here was the loot which had been taken in the express robbery of a month before.

As the man lifted his head and the light fell upon his face, Crawdad came to his feet with an exclamation: "Garn!"

CHAPTER VII.

SWIFT GUN PLAY.

WITH an oath, Garn Sykes wheeled. The bags dropped. One of them burst, and its precious contents gushed in a jingling, glittering flood across the cavern floor. In an instant the big prospector had recovered from his surprise and dropped into a fighting crouch.

Crawdad felt for his tobacco, eying him calmly the while. He was deliberately daring Sykes to draw.

Dreamy Gus came from the shadows and sat down upon a horn of rock. He fished a peanut from his pocket and cracked it. "Lightnin's plumb sluggish compared to Crawdad, remember," he reminded Sykes.

Garn Sykes straightened up and licked his white lips. "I—I found this stuff yesterday," he explained huskily. "Me an' my pardner was aimin' to deliver it to you, but after what happened it clean slipped my mind until to-night."

"You mean he found it. You've done some mighty clever actin', Garn, but it didn't fool nobody. It was Uncle Billy that set outside th' shack last night, you that turned in. When he thought you was asleep, he got his burro and come here, meanin' to pack that gold an' bring it to me. I guess he reco'nized it as th' express loot. Looks as if he stumbled upon it while prowlin' around, huntin' for that Aztec treasure he allus believed was hid some'rs in th' Brimstones. Reckon he had a purty good idy who brought the stuff here. That's why he slipped away an' come here at night. But you follered him."

Dreamy Gus took from his pocket six cartridges and spread them out along his palm. "Found these in a crivvice where you'd tossed 'em," he went on. "Uncle Billy must have suspicioned you had an eye on 'im. That's why he pulled th' balls, emptied th' powder, then put th' leads back again an' slipped you th' blanks. Also, I found this to-day." He held up a shining gold piece.

"Uncle Billy must have dropped one of them bags, same as you have. After followin' your trail all around, I figured you'd hid th' stuff here. Tontoc suggested we give you rope an' let you lead us to it."

Sykes had been listening to the sheriff's monotonous voice as if hypnotized, but now his red eyes narrowed and his face grew hard. Crawdad struck a match with his left hand and held it close to his face, preparatory to lighting his cigarette. "Speakin' of ropes," he suggested, "that reminds me. Garn, you're wanted for murder, likewise for robbery."

Then it happened. Like the head of a striking snake, Garn Sykes' right hand darted for his gun. Two shots that sounded as one roared like thunder through the cavern. A bullet split the shale at Crawdad's feet. Sykes spun around and fell, his arms and legs flung wide. Crawdad retrieved his fallen match, which was still burning, and calmly lighted his cigarette.

Dreamy Gus looked at the fallen man and shook his head. "Sorry yuh had to kill 'im, Crawdad. Couldn't yuh have nicked his gun hand, er somethin'?"

"Well, not in this poor light. Don't worry, he's only creased. He's got a funny way of duckin' when he draws. My bullet went high."

Dreamy Gus crossed the cave and took from a niche the feet of two bootees. The tops of them had been severed at the ankles. Each shoe was slit along the instep and to the point of the toe. Several holes had been bored in the flaps thus formed.

"What's that?" inquired Crawdad.

"Th' boots that made th' trail leadin' to Uncle Billy's body."

Crawdad blinked.

"Ever notice how a fellow's toes cut back when he's walkin' in sand?" Dreamy Gus went on. "Well, when I examined that trail I saw that in this case th' heels had done th' cuttin' back. Also, th' tracks toed in. Uncle Billy wasn't pigeon-toed.

"This put me to thinkin'. I mentioned it to Tontoc. He was on hand when th' prospectors' outfitted for their trip. In fact he he'ped 'em pack their stuff out. He remembered that Uncle Billy had bought some bootees, an' that Garn, figgerin' th' ol' cactus rat oughta know his

business, got a pair exactly like 'em, even to th' same size. Uncle Billy had a whoppin' foot, yuh know. Garn's pair was a little tight, but he took 'em anyway, it bein' th' last."

Crawdad blinked. "What are yuh gettin' at?"

"Garn led the burro down th' arroyo, then packed th' body across White Desert on his back. He placed it on that steer hide an' waited for th' sandstorm to die. Th' wind whipped out his trail complete. When it had quit blowin' he split them shoes an' tied 'em to his feet, heel forward, toe back, placed th' body like we found it, then tracked away, leavin' a trail that pointed to th' body. He had even pulled three hobnails from one sole, an' reamed a small hole like a worn spot in th' other so the shoes would track exactly like Uncle Billy's."

Crawdad nodded slowly. "Uh-huh! I see. An' I was figgerin' all along that Doggy done it."

"Doggy's been over near th' line th' last coupla days. Looks as if he's in with them rustlers. As for Garn, I suspected him from th' first. Notice how pale he was when he rode up this morning? I didn't know then Uncle Billy was dead. I just sprung that to see how he'd take it."

Crawdad blinked, then grinned. "Well I'll be dad-jiggered! Dog-goned if you ain't th' beatenest!"

"Reckon we'll need a lariat," drawled the sheriff. "Garn's comin' around now. Wait here, be back in a minute." He began to sing softly:

Oh, bury me no-o-ot on th' lone prairie-e-e-e.

Taking one of Sykes' candles from a ledge of rock, he waddled away.

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15c.

By FRANCIS LYNDE

IN THE AUGUST 1st "TOP-NOTCH"

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

By JAMES EDWARD HUNGERFORD

I'M looking down from the mountain heights,
 Where the shadows come and go,
 And glimpsing the glinting, gleaming lights
 In the valley, far below;
 I hear the swish of the swaying trees,
 Up here on the mountain crest;
 There comes to me on the vesper breeze,
 The voice of the Golden West.

I'm sitting here "on top of the world,"
 In the twilight shadows dim,
 And gazing off down the trail, unfurled,
 That's threading a cañon rim;
 The stars are shedding their first faint glow,
 O'er the pine trees, tow'ring tall;
 I hear the flow of the creek below—
 The splash of a waterfall.

I see the twinkling lights of a town,
 Through the twilight mists of gray;
 It seems not far, when you're looking down,
 But it's miles and miles away.
 You'd 'low I was lonesome 'way up here,
 In my little cabin nest,
 But, friends, there's plenty of things to cheer
 The heart in a mortal's breast.

Down there in town, there's a heap of fun,
 With its glinting, glaring lights;
 I get *my* fun, with the setting sun—
 The magic of mountain nights.
 Down there is music, and movie shows,
 And the gay cafés agleam;
 I sit up here when the old moon glows,
 A-dreamin' Aladdin's dream.

Right now, she's starting to show her face,
 Up over this peak of mine;
 The world is sure an enchanting place,
 When bathed in her silver shine!
 She gilds with magic the tall pine trees,
 That sway on the mountain crest;
 With Nature's brush, and artistic ease,
 She silvers the Golden West.

“A Tale of Barnegat”

Treasure of the Dunes



By Albert M. Treynor ~

IN answer to an anonymous letter, Lieutenant Leighton, U. S. N., went to North Point o' Beach, a desolate peninsula on the New Jersey coast, seeking a man with a Maltese cross on his left wrist. This man promised information regarding a model of the new Paulson engine, which had been stolen from the government.

Leighton found a murdered man near a fresh-water spring; the man's wrist, however, was unmarked. No footprints of the man or his murderer could be seen upon the sand. John Driscoll and his niece, Diane Driscoll, declared they knew nothing of the affair.

Joseph Gables and his daughter, Winifred, appeared, claiming they planned to trap Manx cats, of which there were many in the vicinity. Gables came along while Leighton and a policeman were discussing the mystery of the man at the fresh-water spring. While Gables was still within sight, he was knifed in the throat. No trace of the attacker or the knife could be discovered.

An ancient volume of Bowditch's "Navigator," reported stolen from a near-by home, was picked up in the sand by Leighton. It seemed to contain directions for finding buried treasure at North Point o' Beach. He hid it in the sand beneath his tent. After Gables had been wounded, the lieutenant saw this book fall from the man's pocket, so Leighton quickly picked it up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VOICE FROM THE DARKNESS.

THE tide was slack when Leighton returned to the ocean front, and he decided to postpone his fishing until the flood set in, later that evening. His

tackle was on the beach where he had dropped it when he hastened to Gables' assistance, and he picked up the discarded rod and bag and went back to his tent.

There was no one in sight anywhere along the gray reaches of sand. He mounted to one of the loftier hummocks and stood sentinellike for a couple of minutes, making certain that he was not under observation. Then, at length, he went down into a neighboring hollow. Under cover of a dense thicket, he scooped out a hole in the sand and again buried the volume of Bowditch's "Navigator." This time, he assured himself, the book would remain hidden. Gables had stolen it once. It was securely concealed now, however.

He spent the rest of the afternoon idling on the beach in front of his tent. A while before sundown he started a driftwood fire and began the preparation of supper. By the time he had finished his meal and cleaned up the pans and dishes, the purple shadows of twilight had begun to settle over the beaches. He sat down comfortably by his fire to watch the changing aspects of the darkening sea.

The yacht *Osprey* had long since disappeared from the offing, and for the moment there was no sign of smoke or sail along the murky sky line.

Inshore, a big fish hawk was sailing in the air, high above the shallows, peer-

ing down at the water and occasionally dropping in a plummetlike dive as he made his splashing try for a mullet or weakfish swimming near the surface. A flock of herring gulls were rising and dipping in clamorous crowds above a clam bed farther down the coast.

A chorus of shrill, thin pipings were heard near by, and Leighton caught sight of a company of little tip-up snipe as they made their way along the beach, following out each receding wave in a hunt for sand grubs and scurrying back with the next incoming wave foaming behind them.

As he sat in musing silence, observing the swift approach of night, the snipe suddenly took wing and swung past him in ragged flight across the dunes. The shrieking of the gulls gradually died away, and at last the solitary fish hawk passed over his head and swerved with tireless wing beats toward the distant mainland.

One by one faint stars began to shine in the velvet sky. The distant beacon of the Barnegat lighthouse all at once flickered into life and began to throw radiant splashes around the dusky horizon.

As Leighton's glance ranged up and down the shore, he was suddenly aware of a stealthy movement down by the water's edge. He peered sharply for a moment and then stood up and moved forward silently. Presently he made out the shape of a small animal slinking along through the windrows of ocean drift. He whistled between his teeth, and with a piercing yowl a Manx cat streaked past him and fled ghostlike for the shelter of the dunes.

By the changing sounds of the surf, Leighton realized at length that the tide was turning. The big night-feeding fish ought to be moving along soon to investigate the inshore holes. For a while he stood at the edge of the ocean, watching the rips and flood currents begin to form as the black waters rushed in over the bars.

There would be life out there where the feeding bottoms were beginning to roil up under the pounding breakers. He returned to his tent, equipped himself with rod and tackle, and strode down

the beach to an open cut, which he had marked earlier in the afternoon.

By the time he had assembled his rig and baited his hooks, the dunes were shrouded in utter darkness. The distant flashes of the Barnegat light seemed only to accentuate the blackness of the night. He waited until a large wave had broken at his feet, and then waded out into the backwash. With a whippy movement of his long, flexible rod, he cast his weighted rig over the water.

It was impossible to see a dozen feet in front of him, but as the line poured off his whirring reel he knew that the baited hooks had shot far out above the breakers. In a short time the spinning spool slackened under his thumb, and he felt the lead sink to the bottom. He drew the line taut and then moved back to a convenient hump of ground and sat down to wait for eventualities.

A surf angler is a seeker of big game. The monster fish that frequent the breakers, as a rule, do not swim in schools, but work their way into the shallows singly or in pairs. It is the uncertainty that gives the full zest of sport.

Leighton might sit quietly for hours, with only the tug and pull of the cross-wise currents to tell him that his line was in the ocean. The next instant might bring him to his feet, with rod creaking and straining under the smashing rush of a great bass or a man-eating shark. Meanwhile, he composed himself in patience to wait.

He was sitting motionless, staring with half-shut eyes into the obscurity beyond him, when, unexpectedly, a light, scuffling footfall sounded in the sand. His head turned sharply and discerned a shadowy figure in the darkness behind him.

"It's Diane Driscoll," said a quiet voice. "Do you mind if I watch?"

"Oh, good evening!" he returned. "I was wondering what had become of you. Won't you sit down?"

She dropped in the sand beside him and circled her knees with her arms. "I wanted somebody to talk to," she told him frankly. "I'd hoped you'd be on the beach somewhere.

"My uncle told me about what happened this afternoon," she went on, after

a little pause. "It sounds even stranger than that very strange affair last night."

"You mean Gables' mishap?" Leighton glanced at her sidewise, observing the immobile lines of her profile as she gazed off to sea. "It's very mystifying. The policeman and I were practically on the spot, yet we haven't the faintest idea what it was that attacked the man."

She stirred with a disquieted movement and cast a quick glance up and down the shore. "I told my uncle about Fisherman Wiggs and his dreadful stories of the invisible inhabitants that are supposed to prowl along this stretch of shore."

"What did he say?" asked Leighton in a matter-of-fact tone.

"He laughed. Accused me of being superstitious." The girl laughed, but the merriment sounded a little forced. "Of course, if such things have happened here before, you can't much blame a man like Wiggs for thinking all sorts of evil things about this place." She turned deliberately to scan the darkness behind her and then, unwittingly, drew closer to her companion. "It's a doleful spot at night," she added.

"Your uncle hasn't any notion what it was that slashed at Gables, has he?" the lieutenant asked.

"No more than you have," she replied. "How would he know, if you and the policeman don't?"

"I thought he might be a bit keener about such things than we are," returned Leighton easily, as he lifted the tip of his fishing rod and took a couple of turns of the reel. "Did he say, by any chance, whether he was acquainted with Gables?"

"No. He didn't mention such a fact. I don't think it likely that they'd know each other."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PUZZLE SOLVED.

FOR a time the lieutenant was silent, and the girl said not a word. "I wonder what Gables' real business here is," remarked Leighton thoughtfully. "Do you think it possible that he also is seeking buried gold?"

"What!" exclaimed Diane.

"The lost treasure of the schooner *Jaybird*?" he persisted.

Diane turned tensely to face her companion. "Why, what makes you think that?" she demanded. "He—I remember he told us that he had come here to try to catch Manx cats."

"The cats might be used only as a blind," Leighton suggested.

"But—you're just guessing," she asserted. "You really don't know that he's here for any other purpose."

"I was thinking of Wiggs again," he returned. "You remember the old man assured us that the pirates who rifled the *Jaybird's* strong boxes are still lingering hereabouts, guarding their ill-gotten hoard." He smiled whimsically as he watched the girl's shadowy face. "Gables and that other chap last night have been dealt with in a strange and unaccountable fashion. You don't suppose there might really be anything in Wiggs' fears?" he asked.

"Bosh!" she said sharply. "That's ridiculous." She peered at him questioningly for a moment and shook her head. "I know you don't believe any such nonsense."

He laughed under his breath and bore back on his fishing rod, feeling the tug of the line that ran into invisibility beyond him. "There are terrific forces pulling out yonder," he remarked. "I'd hate to be the man who tried to swim across those bars."

The girl drew a quick breath as she followed her companion's glance toward the sea. "You were just joking, weren't you?" she asked. "You don't honestly believe in—in such absurdities?"

"If any more mysterious throat cuttings take place on this beach, there's no limit to the absurdities I'll be able to believe in," he replied grimly. Then he abruptly changed the subject of conversation. "What do you suppose became of your stalled automobile last night?" he inquired.

"It may still be on the bridge, I guess," she answered. "We'll be able to reclaim it, I suppose."

"I asked Sergeant Carter if he'd heard of any abandoned automobile, and he said there was none mentioned in the morning's reports," the lieutenant remarked. "Somebody must have started the car and driven it away."

"It'll be found, I guess," she returned vaguely.

"Maybe Arnold has it," he suggested.

"Oh, I wish I knew!" she said in a tone of deep anxiety. "I'm terribly worried about him."

"You haven't heard from him?"

"Not a word. He should have been here to-day, and he hasn't come."

"Do you suppose he got into trouble with those holdup men?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine what could have happened."

"What does your uncle say?"

"Nothing much," replied the girl, "except to remind me that Arnold's able to take care of himself. If he's worried, he says nothing about it. For my part I don't know what to think, but I have an ugly feeling that something is wrong." She sighed unhappily. "If I had the faintest idea where to look, I'd go myself, I think, to see if I could find out what's happened."

"If it was anything very serious, the police probably would have heard of it by now," said Leighton in an effort at reassurance.

"We can only hope for the best," she remarked, "and—wait."

They sat in silence for a while, but presently, as though to rid her mind of disagreeable thoughts, the girl began to talk of lighter matters. She was curious to know if the angler expected to find any fish in the roaring smother of surf.

"Have you hooked anything?" she asked.

"Only had an occasional tickling along the line," he answered. "Crabs, I suspect. I'd better look."

He stood up to reel in his rig and found that the bait had been nibbled ragged by voracious crabs. He stripped both of the hooks and rebaited each with a slab of oily mossbunker, as big as his hand. Then he stepped into the undertow and cast out through the darkness.

"The flood's nearing the mid stage," he remarked as he sat down again. "The tide runners ought to be working in."

"What time is it?" the girl asked.

Instead of consulting his watch, he glanced at the starlit sky. "Nine o'clock," he answered.

"Can you tell by the stars?"

"By the constellations—if you happen to know the point of ascension for a given hour and date." Leighton indicated a bright group of stars swinging low on the northeast horizon. "Perseus with the diamond sword," he remarked. "His present position says it's about nine o'clock."

"The stars are lovely to-night," the girl said in a dreamy voice, as her glance ranged among the galaxies that gleamed like a golden fringe along the borders of the Milky Way.

"Algol's dying," observed Leighton suddenly.

"Algol?" she echoed questioningly.

He pointed to a pallid speck of light showing in the constellation of Perseus. "There's one of the strangest stars in the firmament," he said. "For three nights running you can watch it gleaming even brighter than you see it now, and at the end of the third night it begins to fade until it almost disappears from sight. After about three hours its light gradually comes back again.

"If you sat here until midnight," he went on, "you could watch it vanish and then slowly come to life. The freakish behavior is caused by a dark sun that dips between the star and the earth once every three days and a little over, as regular as clockwork. The ancients named Algol 'The Blinking Demon.' They——"

Leighton sat up with a startled jerk, as he suddenly broke off speech.

His companion turned wonderingly. "Why, what's the matter?" she inquired.

For a moment he did not answer. His pulse was hammering with a quickened beat. He was staring toward the northeast sky, but he was thinking about the book he had hidden in the sand, recalling the queer message written on the cover.

"Where the demon blinks at the warning light," read the part of the sentence that he heretofore had failed to comprehend. The Blinking Demon! The star Algol! The Barnegat lighthouse! The key of the riddle was in his hands. An imaginary line should be drawn between the star and the lighthouse, transected by a north-by-east line from the spring.

"Dig at the crossing," the seeker was advised. Leighton almost laughed aloud in his excitement. He had solved the

cryptogram. There could be no mistake. If the treasure of the lost *Jaybird* was buried in the dunes, he knew where to find it.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FISH FULL OF FIGHT.

THE thought of personal gain had not entered Leighton's mind. He had been sent to North Point o' Beach on an official errand of the greatest importance and for the time being was not his own man. He had neither the liberty nor the desire to join in a greedy scramble for the hoard of the wrecked *Jaybird*.

Nevertheless his imagination was stirred by the knowledge that he had stumbled upon a long-sought secret. He believed that soon he might walk straight to the spot where ancient treasure chests lay rotting under the dunes.

Diane Driscoll was watching him in tense curiosity. "What in the world has happened?" she asked.

He recalled himself abruptly and turned with a quizzical expression to peer into her face. In the dusk of night he could see the soft contour of her cheek and the gentle line of her parted lips, and he could feel the warmth of her eyes as she gave back his glance.

It gave him a thrilling sense of contentment to have her sitting there beside him, as though a sweet and vital necessity were suddenly fulfilled. And as he looked at her searchingly, there came to him all at once the amazing knowledge that if he had handfuls of gold and jewels to give away, then this was the one woman to whom he would bring his fabulous gifts.

For a second he was ready to blurt out everything; and then sanity returned, just in time. The secret of the book was not his to reveal. Did it rightfully belong to Diane Driscoll? He was not so sure. There really was very little he knew about her.

He felt that he could take a great deal on faith, but at the same time it was as well not to be too sure of instinctive judgments. Later he might lead her to the hidden treasure—if he chose. Or he could quietly forget the discovery he had made.

Somehow he felt a presentiment that the *Jaybird's* crime-stained hoard could

bring nothing but evil and ill luck to its finder. It might be better to let it remain buried forever. At least there need be no hurry about uncovering it. Later events would make him decide what to do.

He had to give some explanation to Diane Driscoll, however. "The stars fascinate me," he told her. "When I look at them, I sort of forget myself. It's as though I were soaring off to meet them. I'm sorry to act so stupid."

She regarded him gravely for a moment, and then her lips curved in a comprehending smile. "You don't need to apologize," she said. "I feel that way about them myself."

They sat for a while without talking, in pleasant harmony with themselves and the silence that had fallen between them and with the darkness that seemed to shut out the rest of the world. The breakers pounded and thundered unseen before them, and the spray drifted back into their faces. No one came to disturb them. They were alone, and yet the sense of lonesomeness was gone. The desolate beach did not seem such a dreadful place.

Leighton had forgotten the fishing rod he held in his hands; but he was reminded all at once by a sharp strike at the end of the line. He was on his feet instantly, feeling rather vexed at the fish, or whatever it was, that had chosen just this moment to interrupt his thoughts.

There was a quick rush as the line started to run out, but as the angler instinctively threw up the tip to set the hook the line suddenly went slack. He started to reel in and felt nothing but the weight of the lead dragging on the bottom.

Diane Driscoll had stirred out of her reverie and was watching with interest. "What was it?" she asked.

"Grabbed like a striped bass," was the answer.

Leighton pulled the rig to the beach and found that the bait on the lower hook had been nearly torn away by a pair of savage jaws. He stripped off the mangled piece of bait and then thrust the rod into the sand and left it standing upright, while he turned aside to cut another strip of mossbunker.

He was bending down with an open knife in his hand, when he was aware of footsteps behind him. Looking around, he saw a dim figure approaching in the darkness.

"Who's there?" he asked crisply.

"It's only I," answered a woman's voice. "Winifred Gables."

"Oh!" he said without any great enthusiasm. "Good evening, Miss Gables."

The young woman came forward, and her glance ranged sharply toward Diane Driscoll. "Any luck?" she inquired.

"It depends on what you call luck," replied Diane with a faint laugh. "If you mean fish—no."

"How's your father?" asked Leighton.

"He's comfortable—doing so well that I saw no reason why I couldn't leave him for a while and take a walk."

"His wound isn't as serious as it might have been," remarked the lieutenant. "He was very lucky."

Leighton turned away and knelt down in the sand over his bait basket. He selected a large mossbunker and slit it in two lengthwise, with a sharp-bladed knife. Then he went back to his rod and impaled the strip of fish on the unbaited hook.

This done, he took up the rod, stepped down into the water, and cast the fresh bait far out into the breakers. When he backed up the beach again, Miss Gables was still standing where he had left her, watching him in the darkness.

"Can fish swim in that awful surf?" she asked him.

"They can and do—big ones and little ones—all kinds. You'd be amazed if you could see the queer things that are moving around under that tumbling water."

"A man couldn't swim in it, could he?"

Leighton looked at her curiously, wondering at the question. "A strong swimmer probably could live in the breakers," he replied, after a pause. "But there's no saying where the currents would take him. I'd hate to be out there myself just now."

The lieutenant had decided that Winifred Gables was making idle conversation as an excuse to linger on the beach, but she quickly undeceived him.

"Well," she said with a sudden brisk-

ness of manner, "I guess I'd better be going." She turned abruptly to take her departure. "Good night!"

Leighton and Diane said good night and watched the shadowy figure drift away in the darkness.

"What a queerly acting woman!" said Miss Driscoll, under her breath. "What do you suppose she wanted?"

"I can't guess. But it struck me that she came down here for some definite purpose. To see who was on the beach, perhaps."

"What difference could it make?"

Leighton did not reply. It occurred to him that he knew the reason for the woman's visit. Her father by now probably had discovered the loss of Bowditch's "Navigator," and he would guess what had become of it.

Very likely he had sent his daughter to search Leighton's tent, and she had taken the precaution of making sure that the owner would not be at home. The lieutenant grinned to himself. She was welcome to search as long as she liked; she wouldn't find the book.

"I should think she'd be afraid to leave her father alone," said Diane, with a glance into the darkness behind her. "It—whatever it was that attacked him this afternoon—might decide to come back to-night."

Before Leighton could find anything to say, he was pulled to his feet by a terrific yank that nearly tore his fishing rod from his hands. It was like a sledgehammer blow, struck unexpectedly in the darkness.

The flexible bamboo tip bent in a quivering arc, switching back and forth. It was only his instinctive quickness that enabled him to thrust the rod butt into his belt rest and bear back against the surging rush of the force that had struck upon his line.

Beyond him the breakers thundered and roared, and out somewhere in the blackness was a living creature of some sort, tethered to his rod by a few hundred feet of linen thread. In the void of darkness it was impossible to know what had taken the hook, save that his unseen quarry had the strength of a man and ten times the activity and fighting fury.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN ASTONISHING CATCH.

THE reel was spinning around with shrieking gears as the line ran out. Leighton had set the automatic drag, but the seaward rush continued without apparent check. The departing line continued to sing through the guides, and he tried the added pressure of his thumb on the rapidly revolving reel.

He put on all the resistance his tackle would bear in an effort to stop the frenzied run. Only a thin core of thread was left on the spool, and still his fish was tearing off line. It was time that something was done about it.

He flicked up the tip of the rod, and began "pumping" with quick, sharp jerks. The punishment of a yanking hook sometimes turns a runaway fish to the right or left along the shore.

For the first time since his bait was snapped through the surf, Leighton began to feel that he might take a hand in the game on his own account. The torpedolike rush ended abruptly, and there followed a series of bucking, plunging movements, as though his fish had changed into a rat-shaking terrier.

"Got him leaping!" he cried. "If we can just swing him down the beach——"

The line drew taut for an instant and then suddenly went slack under his thumb. He gave his reel handle a few tentative turns and felt nothing but the dead weight of his casting lead scraping on the bottom. "Well, that's that!" he remarked with a rueful laugh.

"What happened?" asked Miss Driscoll with a tingle of excitement in her voice.

"He bit the leader in two and has left our shores."

"Oh!" said the girl in disappointment, as Leighton started drawing in his sagging line. "He was a big one, too, wasn't he?"

"Enormous. Too much heft for a bluefish, yet he evidently has a good set of teeth. Shark, I guess."

Leighton retrieved his wet line and presently brought the weighted rig in to the beach. He drew a flash lamp from his pocket, turned on the light, and bent forward to investigate.

As he had supposed, one of the pair of hooks was missing. The gut leader had been snipped in two by a square, clean cut.

The upper hook, affixed by a swivel three or four feet above its mate, apparently had not been touched. He turned his light toward the slab of bait, and his eyes opened in staring incredulity. The chunk of mossbunker had disappeared, but there was something else in its place—a flat, oval-shaped object, dangling wet and limp from the hook.

"How do you suppose that got there!" he exclaimed.

He looked closer and touched the thing with his fingers. It was made of rubber, and investigation found it to be a tobacco pouch.

Diane Driscoll had moved forward to peer over his shoulder. "Where did it come from?" she asked.

"The bait must have come off, and I snagged this when I was reeling in. It probably was drifting around in the ocean. I don't quite see how it could have impaled itself, but evidently it did."

Leighton drew the pouch from the hook and held it in the palm of his hand. It was formed of two compartments, one of which slipped into the other, forming a water-tight pocket. The pouch seemed to be empty, but he opened it in idle curiosity and looked within.

A tiny paper was tucked in the fold of rubber. He pulled forth the slip and brought it under the ray of his light. There was some sort of pencil scribbling on the damp sheet. He glanced at the writing and caught his breath with a gasp.

"What!" cried Miss Driscoll.

Without a word Leighton gave her the paper and held the light for her to see. There was a single line of script, which read:

Sandy Inlet—help—Arnold Driscoll.
That was all.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA.

FOR several seconds Diane Driscoll stood without speech, the paper gripped in her unsteady hands. She looked at the amazing communication

and winked her eyes and looked again, as though she were not quite certain that she dared trust her own vision. "What does it mean?" she asked, at last, in a small, frightened voice.

"It came to us—out of the ocean—attached to my fishing line." Leighton spoke with the hushed solemnity of a man who had witnessed a miracle.

"You said it was something adrift in the sea—that you hooked it accidentally," the girl returned in a tense whisper. "A call for help from my cousin Arnold—thrown into the ocean, and drifting straight to us! It's impossible!" she exclaimed.

"Impossible!" he agreed. "Not a chance in a trillion that it could happen that way."

The girl glanced into the misty darkness, where the breakers rolled with their thunderous sounds, and she shivered as though with sudden cold. "What—what can it mean?" she faltered.

"Do you know your cousin's handwriting?" asked the lieutenant.

"I'm not sure." She studied the moist paper again and slowly shook her head. "This is just a hurried scrawl in pencil. I couldn't say whether it was his hand, or some one else's."

Leighton peered over her shoulder and nodded grimly. "It does look as though it had been written in a moment of stress."

"There was something on your line a while ago," the girl said faintly. "Something alive and stronger than you."

"Shark," he declared quietly.

"You didn't see it. You didn't see anything. You can't be certain it was a shark."

He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. "What do you think it was?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she looked up at him with scared eyes, like a child imagining invisible terrors.

"It was a fish," he asserted. "It couldn't have been anything else. What did you suppose?"

"A man?" she asked. "Somebody out there in a boat, or swimming?"

"Somebody who stripped the line off my reel and then removed the bait and hooked on the message?" He smiled and shook his head. "No man ever swam

as fast as that; no boat could maneuver in that surf. It's out of the question."

"Then—then what?" she whispered.

Leighton shrugged his shoulders. "However it was accomplished, it's in keeping with the other queer things that have been happening around here."

"These dreadful dunes!" she said with a shudder, and looked about her as though she expected each instant to see her mounting fears take shape in some appalling apparition.

"What about the message?" asked Leighton after a little silence. "I wonder if it really can mean anything!"

"Arnold!" she exclaimed. "I don't know. We left him last night, way over on the other side of the bay. We haven't heard from him since. And now we pull this out of the ocean—an appeal for help. I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what to think. Do you know where Sandy Inlet is?" she asked suddenly.

"Sorry, but I never heard of it. If there is such a place, Captain Long would probably know."

The girl creased the paper in her fingers and stood for a moment in brooding thought. "I'd better show this to my uncle," she said. "Do you mind if I take it?"

"Of course not," he answered.

"Good night!" She turned to move away and then hesitated, gazing irresolute across the murky dunes.

Diane Driscoll had proved her courage in the face of mere physical danger, but now as Leighton looked at her he realized that she was afraid to venture alone across the dark strip of sand. He strode forward without a word, and she caught step with a grateful sigh and kept close beside him as he walked back toward her uncle's camp.

The distance was not great, and presently they reached the knoll overlooking the hollow where the tents were pitched. There was a light burning in one of the tents. Not caring to intrude upon the unfriendly Driscoll, Leighton decided to go no farther. He and his companion lingered for a moment to say good night.

The girl gave him her warm hand as she looked up at him in the darkness. "Whatever may happen to us," she said in parting, "I want you to know that I

can never forget the way you have stood by me—through everything.”

Leighton returned to the beach front and, after a search, found the place where he had left his fishing rod standing in the sand. He thrust his hands into his pockets and stood for a while facing the sea, staring off vacantly into the night. Presently he drew his flash lamp from his pocket and cast a circle of light about him.

Behind him was the knoll where he and Diane had sat. Their footmarks showed distinctly in the scuffled sand. For a couple of minutes he moved back and forth, examining the ground. Here were his own tracks, leading back and forth from the ocean when he had cast his line and later played his fish.

On the higher slope, his tackle bag and bait basket were lying as he had left them. A short distance away, his rod stood upright, with the butt thrust into the sand. Beside the rod were Winifred Gables' footprints. The woman had lingered there for several minutes before returning to her father's camp.

Leighton recalled the incidents of the woman's visit. He had reeled his line in from the ocean and had just removed a torn piece of bait from the lower hook, when she had come up unexpectedly in the darkness. While he was cutting fresh bait, several paces away, she had remained where the rod was sticking in the sand.

Near the spot where the woman had been standing, he found the mangled piece of mossbunker that he had tossed aside. He looked farther along the slope and discovered a second slice of bait lying in the sand. For a moment he stared with puzzled brows, and then all at once the truth dawned upon him. Winifred Gables had put the tobacco pouch on his hook.

Leighton grinned in self-depreciation as he realized how easily he had allowed himself to be hoodwinked. But at any rate he now understood what had happened. While his attention was engaged elsewhere, the woman must have stripped the bait from the top hook, and in its stead fastened on the pouch containing the written note. In shape and size the pouch was somewhat like a fat slab of

mossbunker, and in the darkness he failed to discover the substitution. He had rebaited the lower hook and, without examining its mate, had stepped down to the water and cast his line out into the breakers.

The pouch, of course, was on the line when the fish took the lower hook. It was still there when he lost the fish and reeled in. So what had seemed a most astonishing mystery, really amounted to no more than that. Winifred Gables must have known he was fishing, and she must have come down to the beach with the deliberate intention of working this singular hoax.

What was her motive? Leighton's face sobered as he considered the possibilities. Was Arnold Driscoll in trouble at some place known as Sandy Inlet? If such was the case, Winifred Gables knew where he was to be found and had taken this sly method of giving information without betraying her own part in the affair.

There might be other explanations, however. The woman possibly was only trying to amuse herself by playing a practical joke on the fisherman. Or again it might be that she had hoped to lure John Driscoll away from North Point o' Beach by sending him on a wild search after his lost son.

There was no saying what the woman's purpose might be. But one fact at least was certain: She knew something of Arnold Driscoll and was aware that he had failed to put in his expected appearance on the beach.

After reflection the lieutenant decided that there was but one way to learn the truth. He would go to Miss Gables and find out what she had to say.

CHAPTER XXIX.

UNWILLING TO TELL.

THE Gables' tents were pitched behind a sand ridge near the lower end of the Point, not far from his own camp. Shouldering his fishing equipment, Leighton tramped across the dunes and presently caught sight of a driftwood fire, glowing in a sheltered hollow of ground. As he drew nearer, he made out the conical outlines of two tents. A human

figure sat motionless in front of the fire, and he instantly recognized Winifred Gables.

The woman sprang to her feet as the intruder appeared in the circle of fire-light and stared in surprise. "Oh!" she said after a tense pause. "It's you!"

Leighton moved forward and exhibited the rubber pouch. "I suppose this belongs to your father," he remarked coolly. "I thought I'd better return it."

Miss Gables regarded him blankly and quickly shook her head. "It isn't his," she asserted, almost too vehemently, he thought.

Before he found anything further to say, a light flared up behind the canvas wall of one of the tents, and Gable's voice called from within.

"Who's there?" asked the man sharply. "What's wanted?"

Without giving the daughter a chance to protest, Leighton pulled back the tent flap and entered. The cat hunter was lying on the camp cot where they had deposited him that afternoon. He fixed the visitor with a keenly questioning glance.

"Why you come here?" Gables inquired.

The lieutenant showed him the tobacco pouch. "This yours?"

Gables extended a hand from under his blanket, inspected the pouch closely, and promptly nodded. "Yes," he answered without hesitation. "Where you find it?"

"I found it on the beach," replied the lieutenant gravely. "Thought it might be yours and brought it to you."

"I don't know how it could get on the beach," said Gables, "but maybe I dropped it from my pocket. You could have waited until morning with it; but thanks, anyhow."

"How do you feel?" asked the visitor.

"I been asleep," Gables answered, "but I guess I'm all right. I'll be up again by to-morrow."

"Well, good night," said Leighton, and left the tent. By Gables' ready acceptance of the pouch, he was certain that the man had no part in his daughter's recent adventure.

Outside, the lieutenant grimly con-

fronted the woman. "The pouch was his," he told her.

"If he says so, I suppose it is," she returned. "I didn't happen to recognize it."

Leighton lowered his voice so the man in the tent would not hear. "Why did you hook it on my fishing line?" he asked.

The woman glanced up, startled. "Why—what do you mean?" she asked.

"With a warning note inside," he pursued.

"Why—I don't know what you're talking about," she parried.

"When you came down to the beach a while ago, you stood beside my fishing rod," he declared. "Before you arrived, there was a piece of bait on the top hook. After you left, I found the bait in the sand and your father's pouch on the hook. There was a paper with a message inside the pouch."

"The bait very likely fell off when you cast," she suggested.

"And the pouch?"

"It probably was dropped on the beach, as my father says, and the outgoing tide carried it into the ocean. And then you just happened to hook it as it drifted around."

"How do you suppose the written message got inside?"

"How do I know?" she returned sharply.

"You insist that you had nothing to do with it?"

Her full lips set in an angry line, and her eyes blazed resentfully. "I have told you that I know nothing about it," she declared. "That's enough, isn't it? Or are you going to continue accusing me of falsehoods?"

"Do you know a man named Arnold Driscoll?" he asked.

"I'm not going to answer any more of your questions!" she snapped.

Leighton faced her with searching scrutiny. For a moment she met his level gaze, and then her glance wavered and shifted away. He felt absolutely certain that she was telling deliberate untruths, but he also appreciated the futility of questioning her at greater length.

She had denied all knowledge of the

message, and by the stubborn set of her jaw he realized that she would continue to do so. A further catechism would gain him nothing, and he saw no sense in forcing an open breach between them.

He regarded her with a whimsical smile and lightly shrugged his shoulders. After all, Arnold Driscoll's troubles were none of Leighton's concern. The message by now was in the hands of Arnold's father, and John Driscoll could act in the matter as he saw fit.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," the lieutenant said pleasantly. "I thought you might tell me how the pouch got on the hook, but it seems not. It wasn't of much importance, really."

"You've found out what you wanted to learn," the woman asserted stiffly. "I know nothing whatever about it."

Leighton laughed. "Good night," he said, and turned abruptly on his heel.

As he walked back across the dunes, he decided that he had fished enough for the evening. He had not slept the night before, and it occurred to him that he was feeling rather jaded. There was no knowing what might happen next along this gruesome strip of shore. While the chance offered, he would be wise if he tried to obtain a few hours' rest. So, instead of going back to the beach, he returned to his tent and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BLINKING DEMON.

MENTALLY and physically, Leighton was very tired, but the moment he was wrapped comfortably in his blanket, he discovered that he was keenly and intensely awake. He could not imagine why he was unable to go to sleep. For a long time he lay with his eyes shut, trying not to think; but in the end he knew it was no use.

The events of the day and the preceding night crowded through his memory in an endless procession. Sights and sounds and faces came back to tangle and untangle in his brain. In fancy, Diane Driscoll had returned to torment him with the enigma of her eyes. John Driscoll scowled at him across the dunes.

Leighton imagined he saw Gables lying in the sand with his throat cut and none

of his attacker's footprints near him. The dead man by the spring was before the lieutenant again in vivid recollection. Who were these people, and what would be the outcome of the strange drama that apparently involved them all?

There was no answering the questions that kept flooding into his mind. He sighed and shifted his position and made a determined effort to sleep. Then, for no reason at all, he was reminded of Fisherman Wiggs and of his grisly stories about this North Point o' Beach. Had there really been a schooner *Jaybird*, and was there pirate treasure buried hereabouts?

The lieutenant wondered if he actually had solved the riddle contained in the ancient book. Did he know where to look for the spot among the dunes? If he dug there, what would he find?

With a petulant movement he turned over again and composed himself to rest. As he relaxed, however, he thought he heard a sound outside his tent. In an instant he had tossed off his blanket and sat upright, listening.

Whatever it was that had disturbed him, it was still now. The roar of the breakers filled his ears, but there was no other sound. He slipped his revolver into his pocket and cautiously opened the flap of his tent. The far-off flashes from the Barnegat lighthouse seemed to fog the vision, without dispelling the darkness.

Leighton peered about him and discovered no movement of any sort. He was not at all certain that he had heard anything. With his flash light in hand, he stepped outside. The pool of bright light swept around the tent, and he saw no sign of intruding footsteps. It had been his imagination, he decided, and went back to his blanket.

When he had wrapped himself up again, however, he knew definitely that he would be unable to sleep. He got up again, put on his hat with an impatient gesture, and once more strode out into the night.

For a while he stood facing the ocean, feeling the east breeze ruffling his hair. He had half a notion to take his rod back to the beach, but as he gazed off toward the rumbling waters he discovered

somehow that he had lost interest in fishing. His gaze wandered to the northern sky, seeking the constellation of Perseus. Algol gleamed brighter now and had swung nearer the zenith.

As he watched the scintillating star, Leighton found himself conning over the cryptogram he had read in the old volume of Bowditch. Before concealing the book he had taken pains to commit the written lines to memory. Absently he repeated the words to himself: "At midnight of Sept. 27, where the Demon blinks at the warning light, there draw the line from the spring six degrees, five minutes and two seconds north by north-east, and dig at the crossing."

There was a pocket compass in his kit, and with its help it would be a simple matter to extend a directional line from the spring. The other half of the equation would be more difficult to supply. To find the transverse line it would be necessary to fix the exact point on the northern horizon where Perseus would shine on the hour of the night and the night of the year mentioned in the cryptogram. The point would vary by many degrees from the present position of the Blinking Demon.

The error of a second in the calculation would mean an error of many yards in the transit line across the dunes. It was a pretty problem. But the mathematics of astronomy, and the kindred branch of navigation, always had been a hobby of Leighton's. With an almanac and proper navigation instruments, he knew that he would be able to run an accurate line.

Such instruments as one might need for the calculation, Leighton had noticed that morning on Captain Long's desk at the coast-guard station. The lieutenant grinned suddenly at the tantalizing thought. After all, why not? As long as insomnia promised to keep him awake all night, he might as well find some way to occupy himself. And the quest of buried gold certainly would be a more interesting game even than fishing for sharks.

No harm was apt to result from such a search. If he found the spot, he could dig down and see if the spade struck rotted chests under the sand. Then, if

he chose, he could fill up the hole and go away. No one need be any the wiser.

The temptation was too great. He looked from the star Perseus back toward the glowing flash of Barnegat lighthouse. Then, with a laugh of kindling excitement, he shut the flap of his tent and started forward at a brisk pace across the dunes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

STARING EYES.

IT was a long tramp to the coast-guard station, but Leighton walked fast, and when at last he made out the roof of a lookout tower against the dingy sky line, his watch told him that it was not yet ten o'clock. The night was still before him.

The doors of the government stations are never locked. A dim light was burning in the rear room of the building, and the visitor let himself in without knocking. All was silent within, and there seemed to be nobody about. Leighton walked down the passageway to the captain's office and found the room empty. Presumably Long, and those of the crew who were not on duty, already had gone to bed.

Leighton saw no reason for announcing himself. He was sure that the captain would gladly lend his navigation instruments, and there was really no excuse for disturbing the man's sleep. So the lieutenant entered the deserted office and turned up the light. On the desk was a mariners' almanac, and he thrust the book into his pocket. Then he helped himself to such instruments as he needed and calmly left the building.

He made the return trip without incident, and by eleven o'clock was back at his tent once more, with pad of paper and pencil, theodolite, sextant, compass, and almanac arranged on the ground before him. With his electric lamp fastened to the tent pole, he sprawled out in the sand and set about his abstruse calculations.

He took his sights against the sky, thumbed over the pages of the almanac, and jotted down columns of figures. Presently he fixed his point on the northern horizon and marked the spot by the triangles of a faint star cluster, hanging low above the sea. His mathematical

reckoning assured him that this would be the position of Perseus at midnight of any September 27th.

The precession of the equinoxes would shift the point during the course of thousands of years, but he was dealing only with a century of time, and in such an infinitesimal period the variance of the astronomical clock would be too slight to enter into the problem.

Walking back across the silent dunes, he sighted on the imaginary line extending from the Barnegat lighthouse to the point he had fixed on the horizon. With his direction precisely established, he unreeled several hundred feet of fishing line, stretched out its full length, and pegged it in the sand. When this was done, the hardest part of his task was accomplished. It still lacked a few minutes of midnight.

So far no intruding presence had appeared to disturb him. If eyes and ears were trustworthy, he was the only person abroad in the night. Occasionally the stillness was cut through by the wild scream of a cat, prowling somewhere among the swaying bushes; otherwise he had heard no sound above the monotonous pounding of the surf on the sandy shore.

Treading softly, he made his way across the intervening sand ridges toward the hidden spring of water. He worked his path as silently as possible through the rustling clumps of brush, and presently he dipped into the dark hollow and halted at the brink of the seeping pool. It was here that a lifeless man had been mysteriously found on the morning before.

Leighton turned his light toward the ground and saw that the sand still held a faint imprint to show where the body had been. The victim of the tragedy presumably had been drawn to the dunes by the legend of pirates' booty. Leighton smiled ironically to himself as he glanced about him. For the present, he, too, had become a hunter of treasure.

The fate of previous searchers might have given pause to a timid man, but Leighton merely shrugged his shoulders and went ahead with his task. He leveled his compass in the sand, waited until the needle stopped wavering, and then

noted the specified angle, north of east, and started his transecting line.

A second length of fishing cord served as a tape. One end of the strand was fastened to a peg driven into the ground at the edge of the spring, and then, with the reel in hand, he started forward across the dunes.

At every two or three paces of advance he paused to verify his direction point and to drive a new peg into the sand. So he gradually worked forward. He climbed over exposed ridges, descended into grassy swales, wormed his course through straggling clumps of brush; but he kept his line bearing straight on the compass mark and was confident always of his accuracy.

For nearly two hundred feet he carried the lengthening cord behind him. At last, in a shallow depression of ground, midway between the bay and the ocean, his foot caught under a string stretched taut beneath the grass. It was the string he had pegged out to mark the north-and-south line. He brought the second cord forward and dropped it across the first. Then he drew a full breath and turned to survey his surroundings. Here was the point of crossing.

If Leighton had correctly interpreted the record of the old book, and if his measurements were accurate, then it was to this place that the strong boxes from the ill-fated *Jaybird* had been dragged, nearly a hundred years before. This was the ground upon which the wreckers had fought one another to the death, and perhaps their bones were still lying underfoot. It was here that the moldering chests were buried.

Leighton had brought an intrenching spade with him, but, now that he had found the spot, he felt a strange reluctance about starting digging. While the feeling did not shape itself into actual thought, there came to him a vague, uneasy sense of impending evil, as though an ugly, lurking something were near, waiting.

A dank gust of wind swept inland from the sea, and he shivered and drew his sweater collar closer about his throat. Around him he could hear the faint dry rustle of grass stems stirring in the darkness. It was only the wind, he assured

himself. But his eyes shifted to scan the gloomy coverts behind him. Suddenly his body stiffened into tense immobility.

In the dense shadow he saw a pair of luminous green splotches, like eyes, looking at him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BENEATH THE SAND.

FOR the length of a breath the power of movement left Leighton. His jaw dropped. The smoldering spots stared at him, and he stared back. Then all at once the tension was gone, and he felt the renewed beating of his heart. He strode forward abruptly, and kicked up a spattering cloud of sand.

"Scatt!" he hissed out under smothered laughter.

He was answered by a shrill, snarling mi-aow, followed by a frenzied scampering in the brush, and the eyes were gone.

After that, the spell of imagination was broken. He had allowed himself to be alarmed by a Manx cat, a harmless, little creature that asked nothing except the right to scratch out a living from the inhospitable dunes. His mouth twisted in a shamefaced grin. Brain phantoms had hovered about him, and nothing was there but a badly scared cat.

He gripped his spade decisively and stepped back to the crossing lines. Perhaps *Jaybird's* treasure was hidden under his feet. It didn't matter much, one way or the other. Whatever he might find, it would be only a collection of useless and lifeless things—bits of metal and polished stones, strewn from boxes of decaying wood.

Men put a fictitious value on such stuff. Actually, it was junk. There could be no inherent evil attached to it, no matter how many lives had been snuffed out on its account. Leighton looked around calmly and then set his spade in the ground and started to dig.

The spade cut into the sand with a faint grating sound. He scooped out a first shovelful of sand and sent it pattering among the bushes. For a moment he waited, listening, but the quiet remained unbroken. With a shrug he bent forward and set industriously to work.

For ten minutes, perhaps, he swayed to and fro, tossing spadefuls of sand onto the growing heap beside him. At intervals he paused to peer into the shadows, alert for the slightest intruding sound. But so far nothing had appeared to interrupt his labors.

The excavation by now was deeper than his knees, and the undersurface sand was growing moist, easier to handle. A musty odor of decaying matter drifted to his nostrils. He smiled grimly as he thrust the blade into the soft soil. If there was anything in Fisherman Wiggs' forebodings, surely something ought to have happened by now.

For the hundredth time he stuck his spade in the sand. He started to push it down with his foot, but instead of going deep, as he expected, the blade struck some resisting substance that gave back a hollow, muffled sound.

With a thrill of excitement Leighton dug in again, a little farther forward, and again he heard a woodenlike thump as the steel checked and refused to go down. There were boards, or planks of some sort, hidden under the sand. Were they the top of a buried box or chest?

It sounded as though there was an air space below them. His pulses tingling with acute expectancy, he stooped to clear away the remaining layer of sand. As the blade gritted in the yielding ground, however, some subconscious sentinel of the brain seemed to ring a vague alarm—telling him to look behind him.

His grip on the spade relaxed; he straightened; and his head slowly turned.

There wasn't a sound or flicker of life to break the hush of darkness; yet he found himself standing breathless, in strained, anxious attention—listening—watching—for what, he did not know.

For several seconds he waited with high-keyed nerves, in sharp suspense. Then all at once the oppressive quiet was pierced by a screaming voice.

It was an appalling cry—strident, wailing, unearthly—quavering across the dunes.

Without remembering exactly how it happened, Leighton found himself outside the hole he had dug, standing halfway up the slope, peering vacantly into the surrounding darkness.

The cry was not the yowl of a cat. He knew that much. But singularly he was not altogether certain from which direction it came.

As he stood with straining eyes, trying to see into the gloom, the voice again shrieked across the dunes.

This time he believed he had placed the sound. It seemed to come from the direction of the ocean. The echoing note died, and in the silence that followed he stole forward to investigate. He crossed the neighboring slope of sand, descended into a brush-choked hollow, climbed the next ridge, and reached a barren trough of ground between two wind-stacked dunes.

Above him, against the sky line, he could make out the ragged shadows of trees and bushes. The looming shapes bulked into queer figures that might have been mistaken for crouching men and beasts. He studied them warily, but nothing moved. The crashing of the surf drowned all lesser sounds.

His glance wandered down the slope and checked. There was a black object of some sort lying in the sand a few paces distant. It might be a barrel or a drift log. He stepped forward and leaned down with groping hand and touched a warm, human face.

Leighton drew back with a shivering breath. For two or three seconds he crouched unmoving, as though his muscular power had suddenly left him. Then slowly he stirred, his hand fumbled in his pocket, and he brought out his flash lamp. He found the button somehow and snapped on the light.

There was a man on the ground, lying flat, with arms and legs stiffly outstretched. The face was upturned to the sky. Leighton stared in horror. The flesh above the temple had been laid open by a battering blow, and a crimson trickle ran to the sand. The man's face was bruised and swollen; his eyes were closed; but Leighton knew him. He was Diane Driscoll's cousin—the missing Arnold.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH dated and out August 1st. [It began in the June 1st issue. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.

The Eternal Boy

WILLIE wanted a dog, and he had many and varied arguments with his mother on the subject.

One day he was dispatched on an errand to the grocer's and had been gone so long that at last his mother became very anxious.

Going upstairs and looking out of a window she was reassured, however, for far down the street she saw Willie manfully heaving on a rope the other end of which was attached to a little dog. The pup, it may be mentioned, was resisting every step of the way.

Presently Willie entered the room. "Mother," he cried, "won't you let me keep this little dog? It has followed me all the way home."

Almost Time

A YOUNG man was wheeling a perambulator to and fro in front of his house. He looked hot, but contented.

"My dear!" came a voice from an upper window of the house.

"Now let me alone!" he called back. "We're all right."

An hour later the same voice, in earnest, pleading tones: "Arthur, dear!"

"Well, what do you want?" he responded. "Anything wrong in the house?"

"No, dear; but you have been wheeling Dora's doll all the afternoon. Isn't it time for the baby to have a turn?"

Never Can Tell

IN the faintly lighted conservatory Jack had just asked Jill to marry him. She had murmured, "I don't care if I do!" and thus they were engaged.

"Jack, dear," she began, "am I the only girl——"

"Now, look here, dear," he interrupted, "don't ask me if you are the only girl I ever loved. You know as well as I do that——"

"Oh, that wasn't the question at all, Jack," she answered. "I was just going to ask if I was the only girl that would have you?"

TOP-NOTCH TALK

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers

JULY 15, 1925.

Another Big Feature

WHEN we made the announcement recently of George Goodchild's new serial, "The Rider of the Ranges," we told you that we had other important features in store for you. We believe that we are maintaining a high level of fiction in this magazine, and our belief is confirmed by thousands of letters from our readers; but we are always trying to do better. We are always on the lookout for stories that are remarkable; that have unusual qualities of excellence. And the patient seeker very often gets his reward.

We are glad to be able to tell you that in the next issue you will find another big feature. You will get the opening chapters of "The Prisoner and the Play Boy," by Francis Lynde, well known throughout this country as one of its most able novelists, and we know that you will find this as entertaining a story as we have ever given you. Mr. Lynde has laid his tale in Colorado, in the year 1879, when the city of Denver was overrun with treasure seekers, many of whom amassed great wealth. "The Prisoner" was a native of New Hampshire, a young man chained with the conventionalities and prejudices of his upbringing. "The Play Boy" was the ne'er-do-well son of a wealthy father. The strong contrasts between these two young men is ably brought out by Mr. Lynde, and the remarkable manner in which their characters are affected by the stirring adventures they experience lends additional attraction to a story that is truly fascinating.

We consider this is a really big feature that we are offering you; we feel certain you will like it; and we hope that if you do you will let us know.

Another important announcement will be made in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH.

In the Next Issue

THE complete novel in the number of TOP-NOTCH that will come to you on August 1st will be by an old favorite, from whom we have not heard for some time. John Milton Edwards will contribute "The Waters of Fear," a story that will be welcomed by his old admirers and that undoubtedly will win him hosts of new friends. It is a powerful tale of the West, but it is much more than that. When you have traveled with the hero through "The Journey of Death" you will realize that fact. This is a story that will give you plenty of entertainment, and we do not think you will forget it readily.

The novelette will be by Nels Leroy Jorgensen, who has become a great favorite with TOP-NOTCH readers. It is a tale of the Mexican border, entitled "Not Beyond Recall," and it is quite up to the high standard which you are accustomed to expect from this clever author.

The sport features will consist of a baseball yarn by Harold de Polo, entitled "At the Siren's Call," and a tennis story by Tom S. Elrod, which he named "When the Worm Skidded."

Other short stories will be: "Eskimo Cunning," by Frank Richardson Pierce; "Quest of the Silver Gown," a "Speedy Swift" tale, by John Miller Gregory; "One Whole Man," by Hapsburg Liebe; and "The Dynamite Boss," by William Merriam Rouse.

In addition to Mr. Lynde's new serial, "The Prisoner and the Play Boy," about which we have already written, there will be the next installments of "The Rider of the Ranges," George Goodchild's gripping Canadian novel, and "Treasure of the Dunes," the powerful mystery story of the New Jersey coast, by Albert M. Treyner.

In verse you will get: "Songs of the Crafts—The Bug Hunter," by Ted Olson; "Strike Three!" by James Edward Hungerford; "In After Years," by Mae Currier Minard; "On the Sea of Dreams," by Ronald Barrett Kirk; and "Joyous Hours," by James A. Sanaker.

A Call for Phillips

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR EDITOR: I have just finished reading "Suspects All," by Roland Ashford Phillips, and am compelled to say that it is the most gripping and interesting story I have read in a long time. It held my attention from start to finish.

Please let us have some more and often of Mr. Phillips. Very truly yours,

CHARLES EDWARDS.
Washington Avenue, Bronx, N. Y.

Real Entertainment

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Having been a reader of TOP-NOTCH for the past ten years, I decided it was about time for me to write and let you know just what I think of this wonderful magazine.

Can you picture anything better than a stormy winter's night, a cheerful fireplace, the latest TOP-NOTCH, and yourself? Boy, you can't beat it! That's real entertainment with a capital E.

My favorite stories are those about baseball, football, and track sports.

Wishing you a continuation of the success you have enjoyed in the past, I am, yours truly,

A. J. HERTWIG.
Vine Street, Milwaukee, Wis.

Won At Last

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Having grown up with TOP-NOTCH, it seems to be an essential part of my joy in life. I'm writing you now in celebration of my mother's conversion to T.-N., which has been very recent and very funny. Several times I've found pages turned to where I had not been reading. Now she reads T.-N. openly, and admits that there are certainly some fine stories in it.

We agree that variety is the spice of life and of T.-N. Yours truly,

(MISS) L. BRAUTIGAM.
Craig Street, Schenectady, N. Y.

Better Every Issue

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Permit me to congratulate you on the publication of such a fine story as "The Fighting Redhead," by E. Whitman Chambers. I am an old mining man myself, and I always look forward to Chambers' mining stories, because I know they are not faked. He knows what he is talking about, which is more than I can say about lots of writers these days. Give us some more of his stories.

I have been reading TOP-NOTCH for many years and can truthfully say that it gets better every issue.

Yours for bigger and better stories,
J. S. BUCKINGHAM.

Piedmont, Calif.

The Answer Is Yes

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Just thought I would write a line to see if it got printed in your TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE. I don't always read the letters, but once in a while I do, and I wonder if I am not one of the oldest readers—not in age—but in reading T.-N.

I do not know just when it was started, but I started reading the TIP-TOP WEEKLY containing the Frank Merriwell stories from No. 1 till they stopped, and only missed one number, and as soon as they stopped I started reading TOP-NOTCH. Does that place me with the rest of the old-timers?

I think it is one of the best magazines going. I have no particular choice of authors, although Burt L. Standish has been my favorite so long that no one just seems to come up to his standard. Maybe it's because he writes more sport stories, and I enjoy them very much. Also the Canadian Mounted Police stories. In fact, I don't believe I ever read a poor story in the magazine. It certainly lives up to its name—TOP-NOTCH.

Yours truly,
ANSON E. CASTERLINE.
Cortland, N. Y.

An Old Friend Writes

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: As a veteran reader of TOP-NOTCH, having read it more than twelve years, I do not want to be forgotten. As to my favorite author, the length of time I have bought TOP-NOTCH is the necessary answer.

I would like to have a Canadian Mounted Police story again. More power to TOP-NOTCH!

J. P. EDWARDS.
Westfield, N. J.

From Another Old-timer

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: This is the first time I ever said anything about TOP-NOTCH, and I am one of the old-timers, I believe. I began reading the Merriwells—it was No. 30, I think—in 1895, until the change to TOP-NOTCH, and have missed only two copies in that time. I think it is the best magazine I ever have read.

I think you have all good writers. Wishing your magazine to keep on forever, yours respectfully,

J. B. STBLEY.
Guthrie, Okla.

Doing Fine!

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Some time ago you asked for old-timers to send in their names. As I have been a reader of T.-N. since the first issue, I am sending in my name.

Some of the stories I liked best in the past years were: "Lefty of the Blue Stockings"—favorite—"Boltwood of Yale," "The Long Loop on the Pecos"—this is fine, because I was there years ago—"In the Clutch of the Circle"—fine—"Powers Unknown"—good—and all the Mounted Police stories. "Those Rarin' Robins" was fine. "Law Unafraid" is also fine.

As I am an old baseball player, that game comes first, and good, inside-dope stories, like "Lefty," are sure some treat for me; they recall old days.

As to what kind of a story I like best, it is hard to say, but this much I will say: Just keep up the good work. You are doing fine! There are so many good ones in the magazine and so few bad ones that I do not know where to choose.

I have never missed a copy so far, and I guess I will continue on this way. I remain, yours truly, an old-timer,

N. R. DIAMOND.

Claim Street, Aurora, Ill.

Wants More Boxing Stories

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: TOP-NOTCH is correct—it surely is! I must admire you for your choice of stories. I think that your magazine is the best in its class, and then some.

Give us plenty of boxing stories; they are always good.

Waiting anxiously for the next issue,

Oakland, Calif. JACK RELAFORD.

What an Ex-Marine Thinks

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I presume it is the proper thing to start off by saying that I have been a reader from the first issue, and that TOP-NOTCH is the best on the market.

I plead guilty to the first, but it is saying a great deal to say that it is the best; but I do say that there are none to beat it. It is unreasonable to think that one magazine could have all the best authors, if so we would certainly not get our T.-N. for fifteen cents per copy.

But I do like T.-N. writers; all of them write on some subject, and some of them can write on all subjects—i. e., William Wallace Cook. There are some stories in T.-N. that I do not care for, but that in no way detracts

from the writers' ability. Mr. Cook writes many stories that I do not care for, and he is my favorite writer, but that fact only shows his genius, as he can write on any subject. Yours truly,

D. LEONARD, Ex-marine.
New York City.

A Youngster's Opinion

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I am only a kid thirteen years old, and a reader of your magazine. It's a pip! You have the very best stories I have ever read. I used to read another magazine and thought it was the best out; but since I got hold of yours last year, I haven't missed a copy yet. Stories like "Law Unafraid" and "Ahead of the Limited" are the kind I like. Yours for further success,

Baltimore, Md. VERNON WALKER.

Worth Its Weight in Gold

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I find that the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE which you print is a magazine well worth its weight in gold! Fifteen cents is a mighty small amount for such a fine magazine.

This is my opinion of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE. You may print my letter if you like, but not my name or address. Yours truly, Tiltonville, Ohio. A MASTER MECHANIC.

Can Find No Fault

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: We are thirteen years old and have been reading your magazine for the last two years and intend to do so in the future.

Our favorite stories are detective, sport, railroad, and Western, and as these are the kind of stories that appear in your magazine we can find no fault with it. Thanking you,

LEOPOLD BURICK and JOE ZUSMAN.

Dayton, Ohio.

She Reads Them Twice

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Having just concluded the last TOP-NOTCH and reading the letters of other readers, I decided to write to let you know what I think of your magazine. It certainly is one of the best magazines I ever read. It's a magazine that has stories for each individual taste.

I like the mystery and Western stories best. I can hardly wait for the next issue. Often I hunt up back copies and read them through again. Thanking you and the writers for making TOP-NOTCH what it is, I remain an interested reader,

Avon, Pa.

BERTHA BRETZ.



It's Great to Be Great!

By
Thomas Thursday

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

SIMPLY WONDERFUL.

MAYBE you've heard of books that packed such a terrific wallop that they knocked kings, queens, and princes for a goal, tomes that have turned plumbers into presidents, senators into scenario writers, firemen into financiers, and stenographers into Mary Pickfords. But how about a book that could make a flock of side-show freaks quit the white tops and start out to conquer the world for themselves? Creeping codfish, try and imagine that!

To show you what a lot of damage a blank cartridge can do, let us take the case of John Alonzo Wickpick, the party of the first part. There are a bevy of other parts, and that's not another story—it's this one!

I was managing the kid show with The World of Fun Carnival, all of which was a shade easier than racing caterpillars over fly paper. Now to get down to brass tacks, as the hammer remarked to the carpenter.

The show opened the season at a slab entitled Live Stock, Nebraska, the same being a duck-in-and-duck-out burg consisting of a post office, a windmill, and a bunch of hay. A few minutes before we opened the side show I noticed a serious-looking chap trip over a guy rope and sprawl at my brown shoes. Joe Sweeney, the great—according to himself—bally-

hoo speaker, assisted the acrobat to his feet and then let forth a giggle.

"Never mind, brother," said Joe, "they all fall for our side show. What other tricks d'yer know?"

"Er—beg your pardon?" returned the bimbo, smiling. "I'm afraid that my introduction was a little bit ludicrous, eh, what?"

"Clever bit of clowning," answered Joe with a grin. "With a little more practice——"

"Here's the trunk that you dropped," I put in, handing the bird a brief case. "What's it all about, if anything?"

"I can see readily that you are both intelligent men," he replied. "Both of the intellectual type, I dare say."

"I bet you're an ex-showman," muttered Joe, snorting. "Your spiel sounds like familiar apple sauce."

The stranger ignored Joe's doubtful wit, dived into his brief case, and came up with a little red book. He fondled it to his breast for a moment, looked toward heaven, or maybe it was only toward the moon, then inhaled ecstatically. "I have here something that is needed by every ambitious man in America!" he exclaimed.

"Pour some out!" Joe begged.

"This tome you see in my hand," went on the orator, "is guaranteed to awaken folks to their fullest powers of accomplishment. In fact gentlemen, it is the greatest mental stimulator that the world has ever known!"

"Hot Rover!" hooted Joe. "Mister, you sure shake a mean tongue!"

"Yes, gentlemen; this innocent-looking book has aroused hundreds of men from the depths of discouragement and dark despair!" continues Mr. Whiskers. "A tome, incidentally, that shall soon be indorsed by all the prominent people in the country. Think of it!"

"What did P. T. Barnum have to say about it, hey?" demanded the tactless Joe.

"And what, you rightly ask, can this wonderful book be? Some magic legerdemain, some quack nostrum, or pallid panacea? No—a thousand times no!"

"Then what is it?" I inquired calmly.

"Maybe it's a new cross-word puzzle," guessed Joe.

Before continuing with his ballyhoo, as we remark on the lots, the newcomer removed his 1888 fedora and placed it on the bally stand. Then he extracted another red book from the brief case and asked Joe to hold it.

"Sir," he began, after taking a deep breath, "you now have in your hands the key to success, the open sesame to wealth, fame, and glory! The magic wand that will arouse you from your present indolence, an indolence that now has you bound to the uncertainties of the show world. Surely you wish to become awakened to your latent powers, do you not?"

Joe evidently did not. He blinked his eyes, wiggled his ears, then sniffed. "Ring off, kid," he replied, "I got your number. You're one of those wise-cracking book agents. My mamma never raised no foolish children. Toodle-oo!" After which, Joe turned on his rubber heel and blew into the tent.

"Guess I'll be leaving, too, professor," I said. "There ain't no book in the world that could wake up a beezark like me. Come around with some dynamite and try your luck. S'long!"

"Ah, but, my dear sir," he cried, "if you but knew of the wonderful inspirational messages contained in 'It's Great to Be Great' by John Alonzo Wickpick, I feel sure that you would gladly pay at least one hundred dollars for a copy! But I do not ask for such a sum. All that I ask——"

"Sorry," I cut him off, "but I got to go over to the treasury now and kid the 'Old Man' into giving me some advance for some of the side-show attractions. Bon soir!"

"Er—just a moment," he pleaded. "Will you permit me to enter the tent and have a chat with some of the show folks? It cannot do any harm, you know, and it might do a world of good. In fact, I feel sure that it will!"

"Go ahead," I snapped. "But, take it from me, if you can peddle anything in the line of litterchoor to those stoneheads on the exhibition platforms, you're a pip!"

"Thanks awfully." He blew into the tent.

On my way back from the treasury wagon, after a corking battle with the Old Man, I encountered Mr. Book J. Agent once again.

"Ah, there you are!" he exclaimed. "As you may observe, my sample case is empty of books. Unfortunately, I had only five copies of the masterpiece with me. However, your compatriots were intelligent enough to purchase all that I had in stock. They are a very alert set of men and women, I assure you. And, if you'll pardon the observation—which is well meant—you might take an example from them. I bid you good day, sir!"

"Wait a minute, Oswald!" I hollered. "Let me get you right. Did I understand you to say that them freaks, in that kid show, bought books?"

"That's exactly what I mean," he replied. "The—er—Fat Lady bought one; the Sword Swallower bought another; the Human Skeleton thought it was wonderful; the——"

"Great!" I had to laugh. "I guess they thought they were frankfurters, not books. What did they say they was gonna do with 'em—use 'em for pillows?"

"Your levity is unwarranted," he returned suavely. "They are to study the world of wisdom and inspiration contained in the pages of the volume in their spare moments. Who knows, perhaps within your institution of strange, odd, and curious people from all parts of the world, there may be some latent genius who, once awakened to the real magnitude of a suppressed ambition, will go

forth, like Alexander, and conquer the world! I tell you, sir, it is possible; I tell you that, with a copy of 'It's Great to Be Great,' by John Alonzo Wickpick, in one's possession, a man may scale the heights of everlasting glory and success; with it a man may reach the high Olympian——"

I went away from there.

CHAPTER II.

A COUPLE OF DIZZY ONES.

I DASHED into the tent and noted that the boys and girls were all set to give the show—all except Nicodemo, the Worlds' Premier Sword Swallower. Nick had his left leg sticking over the side of his platform, his right dangling over the arm of the chair, while what passed for his mind was absorbed in a little red book.

"Hello, Nick!" I opened up. "I see that you're going in for the higher education. What's it all about?"

"On seeing me, he looked bored, peeved, and annoyed.

"D'yer wish to see me about anything important?" he asked sourly, gazing at me as if I was a complete set of nothing, handsomely bound in cheesecloth. "If not, Mr. Bailey, I wish to say that I'm busy. I ain't got any too much time for study, now, so kindly don't annoy me. From now on I gotta put in a hour a day on this book. It's great stuff, if you got any brains!"

"Boy, you amuse me!" I tossed back. "What fortune teller told you that you had any brains? Stop kidding yourself."

"You talk like a regular fathead!" he snorted. "If you know how to read—which same I doubt—come here a minute. D'yer see this here book? Well, I bought it off a bimbo who breezed in here a little while ago. He sold some of the other birds a copy, too, but it won't do 'em any good. You gotta have heavy brains to get the big idea. Sit down and I'll read what it says in the first chapter."

"Be yourself!" I hooted. "I ain't no audience. Toodle-oo!"

Well, to dwarf a tall story, the show opened and everything went along a shade better than good. The customers

hopped in at a dime a hop, and business looked far from being a bloomer. Then things took a turn for the worse, as the quack remarked to his patient.

A few moments before we open, the next day, I was sitting on the bally stand, busy doing assorted nothing, when I felt a tap on the shoulder. Whirling around, I saw no less than "Major" Malone, the Human Skeleton. The Major was a bit thinner than an 1823 dime and weighed just enough to keep him from leaving the ground.

"How are you, 'Doc?'" he began with a smug smile on his thin pan. "Hope you're well, because I got some punk news for you!"

"That's all you ever keep in stock!" I flung back. And that's a fact. He was as happy as a fox bareback riding on a porcupine, if you know what I mean. "See this book?" he went on, flashing a little red tome.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's been the turning point in my life; that's what about it!" he whooped. "I only read the first three chapters so far, but it has woke me up to the fact that I have been a terrible sucker for spending all them years in the show business; I might of been a president of a bank, or sumpin'."

"You and me both!" I agreed, kidding him along. "However, due to the odd shape of our knobs——"

"Don't worry 'bout the shape of my head," he shot back. "If I had one like yours I could pose for a horse. Never mind the cheap comedy; I'm serious! I have decided to quit this tough game of trouping and make a big bird outta myself. See if you can get a giggle outta that!"

"Atta boy, Major!" I said. "Go to it, old kid. But you got some job ahead of you, all right. Stay away from Chinatown—you're loaded with hop. First thing you know you'll be challenging Jack Dempsey."

"Think I'm kidding, hey?" he barked. "Well, I'm gonna quit this show to-morrow. Maybe you can laugh that off!"

"What do you intend to do at the start—run for president?"

"Never can tell, Doc. The book says that a man can be whatever he thinks

he can be. D'y'er understand that, or are you just plain dumb?"

"Just plain dumb," I returned. "In the meantime, forget it! Just run in the tent, hop upon your platform, and get ready to give a show. If you ever quit this game you'd starve to death. Blow away, boy!"

Of course, I didn't take the Major seriously. A side-show manager is used to hearing that sort of applied apple sauce for breakfast, dinner, and supper. Absolute peace would be such a novelty that the strain alone would send me to a bats-in-the-belfry hotel.

Besides, I figured that the little runt was just fishing for a raise, a habit they all have, same as plumbers, bricklayers, and congressmen. So I sat down again on the bally stand and prepared to forget all about it. Not so good! A moment later, Lulu Little, known to the profession as The Mountain of Flesh, wobbled out of the tent and sat beside me.

"'Lo, Doc, dear!" she said with a titter. All fat girls titter in the show business. That's about all the exercise they get.

"Hello, Maggie!" I said. Her right name is Maggie McHoy. "What's that collection of bound paper you got under your wing? Did you get stuck on one of them fool books, too?"

"Doc," she replied, fluttering, "I come out here to tell you that I'm leaving this show flat on its shoulder blades at the end of the week! I been reading this here book, and it says that I should ought to make the most out of my young life. So I have decided to come to life and be a tragedian on the legitimate stage. I have latent powers, I have!"

Sizzling spaniel!

"Best wishes," I said. "You should make one peach of an actress, Maggie. That is, if you don't drop through the stage floor into the cellar. If you're a perfect thirty-six, then an elephant is a skeleton!"

"Is that so?" she flared. "What if I am a little plump? That ain't got nothing to do with brains, has it?"

"Well, fat has interfered with my brains something terrible!" I snapped back.

"D'y'er mean to hint that I got any fat in my brains?" she howled.

And so she left me.

CHAPTER III.

OFF TO WIN.

DURING the next few days everything went along as smoothly as snails over glue highways. The boys and girls in the show paid less attention to me than if I were an iron marshmallow. When I took the liberty to call 'em down, or even up, they smiled superiorly and suggested that I find the nearest exit and take my share of the air.

At last, Tim Mackensie, the Old Man, sent for me to call on him at the treasury wagon. When I arrived, I saw that he looked as happy as a cat with a tin mouse. He was just totally disgusted.

"What's going on in your joint, hey?" he yelped, right off the bat. "I been told that the freaks do as they please, as often as they please, and what this trick is built upon is—er—dis-dis'pline. Get me? Why, three of your birds had the nerve to come in here last night and say they wanna quit. Yeah—quit! And—well, what d'y'er know about the mess, hey?"

Right away I happened to think about a little red book hatched out by John Alonzo Wickpick. "Boss," I replied, "I am sure that a book is causing all the riot. Sure, a book, see?"

"A—what?" he demanded, chewing his cigar.

"A book," I repeated. "Some wise-cracking book agent walks into the trap the other day and peddles it to the bunch. It sure has put a lot of peculiar ideas into their nuts, I'll tell you that! They're beginning to wake up, or at least think they are."

"Say, what the Barnum kinda book could wake them up, huh?" he asked, puzzled. "I never knew they was eddicated, like me and you. What's it all about, anyway?"

"Don't ask me about that!" I answered. "I ain't hardly seen the book, myself, but I know positively that it's busting up the party, and that's that."

"I tell you what you do, Doc," he remarked reflectively. "You grab your-

self a copy and see what it is. If there is something that ain't right, I'll fix it, even if I have to knock their blocks off. Just leave it to me. First in war, last in peace, yours for trouble, Tim Mackensie. Beat it!"

I rushed back to the tent and saw Joe Sweeney, my ballyhoo talker, doing a Rip van Winkle on the platform.

"Ballyhoo!" I shouted in his ear. "Come on and wake up—it's time to give a show. I got plenty to worry about besides you!"

Joe got up leisurely and stretched with both hands. "Don't be so bossy," he said with a yawn, as he caressed a little red book. "Besides which, I ain't counting on delivering any more openings to the natives at thirty-five bucks per weekly. What's more, I have just jumped to the conclusion that I have been a grade-A boob for working for anybody—except myself. Try and get a smile outta that!"

"So you're going nutty, too, eh?" I shot back. "Gonna work for yourself, huh? If that ever happens, Joseph, my boy, the almshouse will receive another customer within a few weeks. To be a success, your head is the wrong shape!"

"This here book," went on Joe, paying no attention to me, "which I borrows from Nicodemo, is jammed full of hot stuff. I'll say it is! If you'll keep your trap shut for a minute, I'll read to you what it says in Chapter Seven entitled, 'The World Is Your Oyster—Open It!' Listen, dummy, to what it says.

"The immortals of the world are they who think deeper or more brilliantly than their fellows. The sawdust king, Francois O'Levy, attributed his rise largely to a thought that came to him when he was a young man. He believed that he could do for sawdust what Roscoe G. Hooey did with amalgamated pitch. And Patrick McCohen, the distilled-water king, says, 'My advice to young men is to read a lot, think a lot, and work a lot. I started out that way. I kept on thinking, and I'm still thinking. A man either goes forward or backward.'"

"What's the title of that bed-time story?" I asked. "Sounds funny to me! Who wrote it—Charlie Chaplin? Besides, what do you get out of it?"

Joe looked pained. "Listen to 'im!"

he fumed. "I bet you just use your head to keep your ears apart. What do I get out of it, hey? Well, I'll show you! I intend to quit this bunk-blowing business I'm in and strike out and do something big. D'yer hear me—big! Furthermore and to wit, you can grab my resignation right now. And that's that!"

Old John Alonzo Wickpick shook a wicked pen, I thought. "Er—just a moment, Joe!" I pleaded. "Let's have a slant at that boob awakener, will you? I might get a kick out of it myself!"

"Sure!" he said, passing it over. "But I don't think it will do you any good, if you studied it for a century. Your head ain't the right shape. Au reservoir, Doc!"

Well, as the oil drillers are wont to remark, after the show that night I took the little red book and prepared to read it in my hotel suite, meaning one room. It was a wow! Before I concluded the third chapter, I began to wonder why birds like Hannibal, Cleopatra, Steve Brody, and Jesse James had anything on me. Why couldn't I do the same? In fact, the bozo who wrote the book, John Alonzo Wickpick, claimed that I could.

In the next chapter, he told about humble birds who flew to the top branches of the tree of success, via work, nerve, and pluck. They never had any luck, of course. He told about the career of the famous Ebenezer van Murphy.

Van Murphy, it seemed, started out in life with nothing more than a set of legs, a pair of eyes, and the correct amount of hands. At the rare and tender age of ten he was hoofed out of the family mansion, the same being a log cabin in the foothills of the Bozark Mountains. Ebenezer's pop—meaning father—told the kid to go out and root for himself.

He did! He started off by picking strawberries to earn enough to pay his way to the Great City, which is liable to mean New York, and he reached same in due time. At the age of ten, he was the chief errand boy for the Greater City Canned Parsnip Corporation. At eighteen, he was the third assistant manager and going strong.

He reached twenty and the manager's job at the same time. After that it was all peaches for little Ebenezer! By pay-

ing strict attention to his duties and passing up all forms of pleasure, including crap shooting, he wound up, at the age of twenty-eight, as the chief cook and bottle bather of the company.

Well, after reading the case of Ebenezer van Murphy and the similar successful feats of a number of other great boys and girls, I turned out the light and crawled into the hay. Before morning, believe me, I did some heavy dreaming.

In fact, I spent the entire slumber period in dreaming of empires, millions, fast motah cars, mansions in Newport, butlers, forty blond housemaids, not to mention, though that's what I'm doing, the Greater City Canned Parsnip Corporation. John Alonzo Wickpick sure had the right dope.

Next morning I dashed down to the lot and observed six of my prize freaks trouping out of the treasury, with the Old Man hurling Mr. Anathema after 'em. Right away I suspected a mice. Nicodemo, the Sword Swallower, was leading the flock, followed by Lulu Little, the spare-flesh lady; after her came Major Malone, the Human Skeleton and the rest.

"S'long, Doc!" opened up Nick. "We're all through trouping! And we're gonna start some business for ourselves. You can't keep good men and girls down, see? Just told Old Man Mackensie that he could blow up and bust. Hope you wake up yourself, some day. By, Doc!"

Away they trouped.

CHAPTER IV.

LOUD YELLS.

THE next town we played was laboring under the thirst-quenching name of Cider Gap, a jump of twelve miles from Live Stock. I was obliged to open the side show with only four freaks, the others having gone west, thanks to a little red book. And maybe the customers didn't put up a howl! Ten great and distinctive side-show attractions were advertised on the banners, and when the natives failed to note them on the inside—hot mongrel!—what they told me as they passed out! Not that I blame 'em.

As to the jovial Old Man, he spent most of his waking hours in telling me and the world in general what he would do if he ever laid his paws on the book agent who sold the freaks the printed dynamite. Nothing like that had ever happened to Tim Mackensie before—or since.

On the fourth day business was dead enough to attract the undivided attention of an undertaker. In disgust, I walked down to the treasury wagon to have a chat with the Old Man. As I came near, I heard some loud talking. Somebody was losing his temper and didn't want anybody to find it for him.

"So you're the fathead who sold them red books to the kid-show freaks, huh?" It was the voice of the Old Man, and he has some voice when he's peeved. "D'yer realize that you made a bum outta the show, hey? And then you got the nerve to come around here and ask me to give you a job! Woof—wait till I get a crack at you!"

The next second I saw Mr. Book J. Agent come hurtling out the door, with the boot and fists of the Old Man following closely. The poor mackerel landed in a neat pile on the grass.

"And another thing," added the Old Man. "If I ever get my mitts on that bird, John Alonzo Wickpick, I'll ring his neck so he won't be able to write another book for forty years!"

Before replying, the book agent got off the ground, brushed some assorted sawdust off his clothes, then said to the Old Man with great dignity: "Sir, you now have the honor of beholding the author of the book, John Alonzo Wickpick!"

Oh, Barnum—where is thy sting?

CHAPTER V.

GREATEST OF ALL.

WHEN we arrived at Shin Center, the next show stand, the side show was a sorry-looking mess. We certainly missed those six ambitious freaks, no fooling. Then the dark clouds rolled by, the sun came out—and in walked our old friend, John Alonzo Wickpick.

It was the third day at Shin Center, and the Old Man and me were feeling a

shade bluer than ten acres of Cuban sky. While we both sat in the treasury wagon, thinking deep-indigo thoughts, the door opened and in bobbed the author of "It's Great to Be Great." When the Old Man got one peek at him, he made a lurch with clenched fists, but I held him back.

"What!" snorted Tim Mackensie. "Have you got the crust to come here again? For two cents——"

"Gentlemen," began Wickpick, using a well-modulated voice, "I came to ask your pardon, not to antagonize. I have made a grievous mistake and have done, I'm afraid, incalculable harm to some of your show folk."

"I'll say you did!" howled the Old Man. "And why I don't beat——"

"Bear with me a moment, I beg of you," he pleaded. "I promise to be brief. My mission here to-day is not in behalf of myself, but in the interests of the ladies and gentlemen who, after reading my unfortunate book, were lured away to disastrous pastures. Gentlemen, they have appointed me as their spokesman, and I am here to beg you to reinstate them to their former positions."

"Never!" yelled the Old Man. "First in war, last in peace—slam, bang, bing!—yours for trouble, Tim Mackensie!"

"Wait a minute, boss," I whispered in his ear. "We need those attractions like we need our noses. If this dizzy clown can lure 'em back—for the love of Pete, take them!"

"It seems that they did not find success quite as easy as I had pictured it," went on Wickpick. "I met them at the railroad station about an hour ago, and they held me responsible for their plight. Gentlemen, they are right! Therefore, I think it is my duty to use my powers of forensic oratory to the end that they get their former berths back again. Remember, gentlemen, that Antony forgave Brutus, Josephine forgave the Emperor Napoleon, Nero forgave——"

Well, to make a short story shorter, he kept up a wonderful flow of language for the next fifteen minutes. Talk about the late Mr. Demosthenes wielding a wicked tongue! Demosthenes be blown—John Alonzo Wickpick would have made that old Greek look tongue-tied.

"Aw right," grunted the Old Man, at

the end of the oratory. "Bring the chumps around; maybe I'll talk to 'em!"

Wickpick went to the door, extracted a trick whistle from his pocket, then gave three sharp blasts. From beyond a hedge, a hundred yards away, six familiar heads bobbed up and smiled sheepishly. Led by Nicodemo and Major Malone, they trouped up silently to the Old Man with heads bowed.

For a moment, Tim Mackensie looked at his meek and humble freaks, a whimsical expression on his tanned face. "So you're back again, you rambling rovers!" he growled. Then he smiled faintly. "Aw right—I'll give you another chance. And you can thank the great tongue of Mr. Wickpick for it all. If it wasn't for the way he talked——"

"Three cheers for Mr. Wickpick!" shouted Nicodemo.

They gave him forty, not three.

"I thank you all!" Wickpick blushed. "Especially you, Mr. Mackensie." Then, in a softer voice, he said: "And now I must leave you all. In fact, I intend to look for a position."

"Wait a minute, kid," remarked the Old Man, a twinkle in his eye. "So you're gonna look for a job, hey? Well, speaking of jobs, I have a idea that you'll make the greatest ballyhoo talker the show world has ever known. How'll fifty a week to start suit you, what?"

"Fine!" Wickpick beams. "This is, indeed, a pleasant turn of affairs. Thanks awfully!"

Did he make good? Listen! Ask any showman who is the greatest ballyhoo orator in the game, and he'll say, "John Alonzo Wickpick, of The World of Fun Carnival!"

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"Quite good," said the hungry actor, his eye on the menu, "quite good. Er—have one with me."

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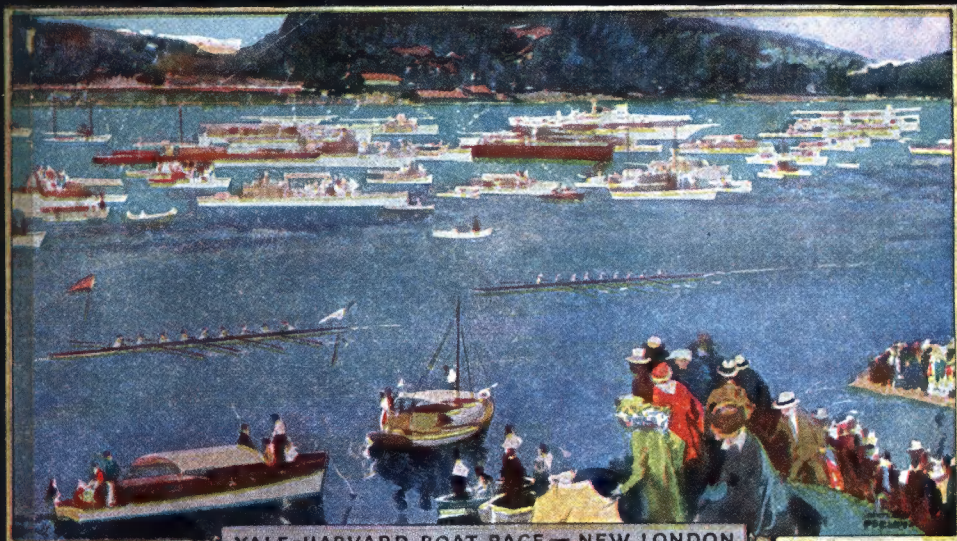
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