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THE IRON CHALICE

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

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A STORY OF THE TENNESSEE MOUNTAINS THAT TAKES YOU INTO THE HEARTS AND LIVES OF BIG-HEARTED, QUICK-TEMPERED CLANSMEN; INTO A BITTER FEUD, AND INTO THE WAR THAT STARTED WHEN LITTLE BUCK WOLFE BROUGHT HIS LOGGING RAILROAD INTO WOLFE'S BASIN

I

THE county's prisoners were passing the gate where Alice Fair and Arnold Mason were standing. They were going jailward, their hands and faces sweat-stained and begrimed from long hours at hard labor. The rattle of picks and shovels and irons drowned out entirely the sounds their weary feet made on the pavement. Arnold Mason saw only the pitiful lack of spirit in their downcast eyes. It touched deeply the sympathetic heart of this man who was of mountain blood, but to whom the Masons had given a city home. He had that tender and magnificent understanding of human sorrows that is so rare except in those who themselves have suffered.

But there was one of the passers-by who walked with his head proudly erect. He was very tall, rawboned and sunburned, and in his dead-black eyes shone the light of an anguish deep and sullen. His great right hand gripped the handle of the pick he carried over his shoulder as though it would crush the wood. He turned his pale, hard face toward the pair of lovers at the gate. Arnold Mason and the girl

he hoped to marry saw that three parallel lines, three bow-shaped scars, stood out on his right cheek like streaks of white paint.

They were the marks of a wildcat's claws, put there years before. And it was by those marks, chiefly, that young Mason recognized the man as his own mother's son and her first born.

"Oliver!" he exclaimed.

The big mountaineer centered his gaze upon his youngest brother. To him, also, recognition had dawned. A queer smile parted his beard and mustaches and showed a flash of strong, white teeth.

"Hello thar, Little Buck Wolfe!" he cried sharply. "Leadin' a high life now, hain't ye?"

Mason stood there, as silent and as motionless as a stone, and watched the clanking line of prisoners until friendly trees along the street blotted out the sight. When he faced Alice Fair, he noted a decided change in her manner.

"He called you 'Little Buck Wolfe,'" she observed coldly. "Was that your other name?"

"Yes."

"I think it's horrid. Who was that?"

He told her. She winced, but he con-

tinued, "My father's given name was Buck. He was a giant of a man, and he was my boyhood's ideal of what a man should be—naturally. I wanted to be named for him; I went without a name until I was nine. So they called me 'Little Buck.'"

"You told me that your people——"

"Were upright and honorable in their way," Mason cut in gloomily. "As I knew them, they were, certainly. I've never been back there. I had to study almost day and night, because I started to school so late. I—I guess I was so much interested in myself that I forgot them."

"And you didn't know until just now," pointedly, "that you had a brother in jail?"

"I've been out of town for three weeks, Alice, you'll remember," he muttered. "I came home only yesterday."

"Well," frowning, "what's the good of going over it? You can't expect me to marry you when you've got a brother in jail, here under our very noses. Honestly, can you?"

She held out to him the diamond ring he had given her an hour before. He accepted it mechanically, and mechanically put it into his pocket. Without another word, she went rapidly toward the house.

Arnold Mason, Little Buck Wolfe that was, walked slowly, with no clear thought as to direction, up the shadowy street. If there is anything that can change the gold of goodness in the mountain heart to iron, it is—this.

The high, barred window of Oliver Wolfe's cell opened to the east. At that window, his bearded face pressed against the bars, his eyes longingly watching the dim shape of Buffalo Mountain fade into the night, stood Oliver Wolfe. He did this every evening now, watched Buffalo Mountain, which was hardly more than a foothill, fade into the night.

Came the sound of footfalls in the corridor, and he turned his head. Just beyond the iron-latticed door, he saw the shapes of two tall men. A key grated in the lock, and he heard a voice.

"I'd like to be alone with him, Sheriff Starnes."

"Certainly, Mr. Mason," the officer answered courteously. "Call me when you want to go out."

The door opened and closed, the key

grated in the lock again, and Oliver Wolfe stood face to face with his brother.

"Why did they put you here, Oliver?"

"For a-provin' I was the best man in town," surlily.

"I see. Assault and battery."

"With attemp' to kill," the prisoner added with a certain pride. "'Leven months and twenty-nine days, and eight o' the days done gone."

He put a hand on his brother's shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Nobody sent fo' you to come here," he said hotly. "Hain't ye afeard ye'll dirty them fine clo'es o' yore'n? You mis'able town dude, whyn't ye be a man, like I am?"

Arnold Mason said nothing to that. A moment of silence passed. Oliver Wolfe's black eyes ceased to stare contempt; perhaps some tender memory of their boyhood days together was at work in his brain.

"But mebbe you ain't as rotten as I thought ye was, Little Buck," he went on. "I thought you was pow'ful stuck-up, y' see. I'm a-goin' to tell ye somethin', and you listen:

"You know pap he used to be the law and its enfo'cement out at home. You know he used to deal out justice wi' his fists when anybody done wrong, and you know he was allus square. He was king o' the section then. But he hain't no more. He's only the leader o' the Wolfe clan now, Little Buck. He——"

"The Wolfe clan!" Mason exclaimed surprisedly.

"The Wolfe clan," Oliver repeated impatiently. "Well, them Singletons, 'at lives at the upper end o' the basin, has been a-fightin' us fo' a long time. Tuck he's dead, and Biddle, and Simon, and Cousin Lije's Buster, and Aunt Jinny's Simmerly—every one of 'em buried wi' Singleton bullets in 'em. When I left home, pap he was a-layin' on the flat o' his back wi' a bullet in his shoulder. But le' me tell ye this right now—the Wolfe's they hain't a-goin' to quit fightin' ontel they hain't able to crook a trigger-finger no more!"

Oliver Wolfe clicked his teeth together savagely, clenched his fists, and began to pace the cell floor. After a minute spent thus, he went back to Mason and pursued.

"I was a dang fool. I slipped down to town here to buy some ca'tridges, got in a rucus, and got arrested—but it took three good men to do it, and don't ye fo'git that—and them a-needin' every Wolfe by name out thar to fight Singletons! The's a good many more Singletons an' the' is Wolfes,



y'see, and the' hain't but dang few Singleton's 'at cain't cut down a hangin' hoss-hair with a bullet. And so I'll come to the p'int at last.

"Little Buck Wolfe, yore people needs you. You quit these here fool ways o' yore'n, and git ye a rifle, and go out thar and fight wi' yore own flesh and blood!"

Mason straightened as though he had been struck. Just then a lamp was lighted in the corridor, and its rays showed the face of Oliver Wolfe to be jerking under stress of emotion.

"Well," Oliver demanded, "are you a-goin' to wear the boots of a man?"

The other turned toward the iron-latticed door, and called to the sheriff to come and let him out.

"Is yore name, dahlin' brother," sneered the jailbird, "Wolfe, or is it Mason?"

"Wolfe," answered the stalwart young man at the door. "Wolfe. Now and forever."

II

THE bottom of Wolfe's Basin is two miles in length, one mile in breadth, and as level as a prairie. The rock-bound and majestic Big Blackfern Mountain makes the eastern wall; the western wall is formed by great Lost Trail Mountain, which lifts high toward the heavens a bald peak called Pickett's Dome. A crystal-clear creek gushes from under a rugged gray cliff at the junction of the Big Blackfern and the Lost Trail, splits the basin's bottom in the centre, and flows out through a dizzily-ported pass, the same being known as Devil's Gate.



Old Alex Singleton and his people lived in twenty-two low and rambling log cabins near the south end of the basin. Old Buck Wolfe and his people occupied eighteen cabins of the same kind near the basin's north end, near the pass. Old Buck's mother lived alone save for a little black dog named Wag. She was sixty-nine, white-headed, as wrinkled as parchment, very sharp of feature and of tongue; she was called wise in her understanding of the curative properties of herbs, and she was a firm believer in supernatural tokens.

Granny Wolfe rose early on this fine summer morning. She slipped her bent old body into a dark-figured calico dress, tied a pair of coarse shoes on her rheumatic feet, wound a red bandana about her white head, bathed her face and hands and dried them on a hempen towel. She filled her clay pipe with homegrown tobacco, lighted it with a coal from the yawning stone fireplace, and took up a long sourwood staff. Another moment saw her entering the crooked, grass-lined path her feet had worn to the home of her favorite son.

A sharp yowl caused her to stop, face about, and bring her staff down hard.

"Durn ye, Wag, ye little devil," she muttered, "I left ye shet up inside! But it's bad luck to turn back, and I jest hain't a-goin' to do it. So yap as much as ye please, ye little devil!"

Now Old Buck Wolfe was a fiddler as well as a fighter, and when his mother had reached a point some seventy yards from his primitive house she was startled by hearing Buffalo Gals fiddled as she had rarely or never heard it fiddled before. Thereupon Granny Wolfe's seamed countenance showed signs of a great chagrin, and she began to talk to herself:

"I'll—be—durned! Ef the durned fool hain't got out o' bed and went to fiddlin'! Wisht I may drap dead in my tracks, ef he hain't! And he'll be a-fightin' them 'ar Singletons afore night, as shore as the Old Scratch hain't a grasshopper! Well, I kep' him in bed as long as I could. The bullethole it's done healed over. Now, I shore do wonder what makes menfolks be allus a-wantin' to kill each other? The Lord ha' mussy on us!"

The fiddler sat in a crude, homemade chair in the cabin's front doorway. He was a huge man, and gaunt, and his long black hair and beard were not without threads of silver. His mother halted a few feet from him, and leaned heavily on her staff; she stared at him quite as though she had never seen him before.

"Reckon ye'd know my hide in a tanyard?" laughed Old Buck Wolfe, dropping the instrument to his knee.

"Hain't you a purty thing, now—jest hain't you!" cried the old woman, with her own particular brand of scorn.

Her son's keen black eyes twinkled. "What's got the matter o' you?"

"You git back in bed!" snapped Granny Wolfe.

Old Buck narrowed his eyes. "When I'm able to fiddle," he said, "I'm able to

fight. Stick that in yore pipe and smoke it, mother. Hey?"

"I'll be durned!" shrilled Granny Wolfe. "You wildcat, ye're a fixin' to go fightin' ag'in! Sech a durned fool! And when is it ye're a-goin' to commencent a-fightin', Buck Wolfe?"

"Us Wolfes," soberly, "is to meet here at dinner-time, and start fo' t'other end o' the basin. It'll be the last fight; d'ye onderstand that?"

The old hillwoman's voice was soft when she spoke again.

"Don't do it, honey," she pleaded, almost pitifully. "Don't. I wisht I may drap dead in my tracks ef I didn't see a star fall over this here house last night, honey; and that 'ar is a shore sign o' death. And I dreamp' o' seein' muddy water, and that's a bad sign, too. Don't do it honey!"

The giant in the doorway laughed outright. He didn't believe in the supernatural.

"My nose itches," he said, winking; "what's that a sign o'?"

"Heh? Why, Buck Wolfe, it's a sign somebody is a-comin' hongry! Jest wait and see ef it don't come true. But them 'ar Singletons, don't tackle 'em ag'in!"

"I'd give a mule ef Oliver was here," her son muttered. He turned to address a meek little woman who had come up behind his chair. "Sary, that 'ar damned old blue-tailed hen's a-scratchin' up yore merrygolds ag'in."

Then he rose, kicked his chair over, and threw fiddle and bow to a nearby bed. He stepped to the ground, took his mother by her lean shoulders, and shook her slightly.

His whole countenance was terrible.

"The Wolfes settled here fust!" he roared.

"When I thrashed old Alex Singleton fo' a-sellin' me a jug o' cawn whisky wi' a leaf o' burley tobacker in it, he needed it. Ha! you fo'got pore little Tuck,

brother Brian's boy, and the rest of 'em, a-layin' up thar in the old Blackfern's breast wi' hunks and hunks o' Singleton lead in 'em? Mother, ha' you fo'got?"

"But Tuck he'd killed one o' the Singletons, which was the very fust killin' of it all, too," Granny Wolfe returned sharply. "Asides, the Wolfes has put as many Singletons in the Lost Trail as the Singletons has put Wolfes in the Blackfern, and rick-

ollect 'at! You'd shorely better let it lay right whar it's at, Buck Wolfe."

He glowered down upon her. "The Singleton had called Tuck a liar, mother, and you know it!" he snorted. "Now save yore breath, is my advice. The fight is to be, and it will be."

The old woman limped into the cabin, where she tried to comfort Sarah Wolfe, mother of Little Buck, the Arnold Mason that was.

Noontime came, and twenty Winchester rifles were brought and stacked against a cedar in the narrow yard. Twenty men, some of them barely grown, sat here and there, on the doorstep, on the woodpile, on the ground; they were waiting for their leader to finish his mid-day meal, and Old Buck was showing his contempt for danger by eating more than usual.

When the Wolfes started toward the south end of the basin, the Singletons moved toward the north end. Like the Wolfe chief, Alex Singleton—a big-boned, broad-bodied man with deep, dark eyes and straggling, sunburned black hair and beard—was not without some of the qualities of a general and strategist. A Singleton sentinel on the side of Pickett's Dome gave the alarm by waving a red bandana, then raced down to join his kinsmen. A woman followed each of the sets of fighters. One of them was old Granny Wolfe. The other was the Singleton leader's only daughter.

The Wolfes' one-man advance guard ran back with the intelligence that the enemy was just ahead. Old Buck rushed his little force to the left, meaning to make a surprise attack on the Singleton's flank. Oddly enough, Alex Singleton gave the same order at the same time, with the result that the two sides lost each other, and spent hours in maneuvering more or less blindly; not a shot was fired, and the silence in the basin was the silence of the tomb.

Buck Wolfe's anxious mother saw that the shadow of bald Pickett's Dome was reaching for the fringe of jackpines that grew on the jagged crest of the Big Blackfern, and she knew it was almost four o'clock. Then, there broke out ahead of her the keen, sharp thunder of rifles—the two factions had met where there was no cover save for puny bushes, and it would probably be a battle of extermination. She forgot her rheumatism, dropped her long staff, and ran toward it.

Two others reached the midway point before Granny Wolfe reached it. One of



the two was a slender, barefooted young woman with deep blue eyes, copper-colored hair that hung down her back in a single thick plait, and a face that was quite finely handsome in spite of its tear-stains. The other sat astride a rearing, plunging black horse; he was young and stalwart, and an officer's shield gleamed over his heart.

"What's the big idea?" he was shouting. "What's the big idea, anyway?"

The daredevil personality of the newcomer awed the fighters. Even if they might have counted him out, there would have been no possibility of going on with the battle without danger to the two women. And to continue the fighting there in the open, where they had met by accident—well, the hillman is no coward, but he wants cover when he fights.

The two little clans acted wisely. As though by a common agreement, they crept off homeward without a word.

The old woman caught the rein of the now quiet horse.

"And who might you be, stranger," she cackled, "'at comes a-ridin' in here like a angel o' the Lord?"

He smiled very pleasantly. "Don't you know me?"

"Not from Adam's off ox, nor a side o' sole-leather!" declared Granny Wolfe.

"I know who it is," said the other of the three left upon the scene. "Granny, it's Little Buck!"

"La, la, la! You don't tell me it's Little Buck. I be consarned ef I'll believe it!" She shook her white head.



creek—there at the sand-bar under the willow—for sticking pine-resin chewing gun

into your hair! Don't you remember, Tot? Afterward, when we'd disposed of the villain," and here Wolfe's dark eyes twinkled engagingly, "you kissed me as a reward for my—er, gallantry!"

Louisiana Theodosia Singleton blushed and said nothing. Little Buck's grandmother was now convinced.

"Well ef it ain't you, shore enough," she cried. Now didn't I tell yore contrary old pap 'at somebody was a-comin' hon-gry? But who'd ever ha' dream' you'd grow from the pesky boy you used to be into the fine-lookin' man ye are! You shore do 'mind me o' yore pore grandpap when he used to come to see me afore we was married. Look at him, Tot Singleton; don't you reelly think he's jest grand-lookin'?"

"You—you're a-doin' the talkin' now, Granny," said Tot Singleton, visibly embarrassed.

Wolfe smiled. But only for a moment. There came from somewhere near the foot of Lost Trail Mountain an old and broken voice that seemed a part of the peacefulness of the eternal hills; an old and broken voice that was filled with the holiness of a benediction:

"*'And, lo, the star, which they saw in the East, went before them—'*"

III

THAT was pore Grandpap Bill Singleton 'at hollered," explained the old woman, putting her right hand up to meet that of her kinsman. "We calls him the 'Prophet', Little Buck."

She emitted a tiny shriek at his grip; he had forgotten her rheumatism. He apologized quickly, and held his hand down toward the young woman who had been his boyhood sweetheart. Tot Singleton glanced straight into his eyes, seemed suddenly afraid of him, and ran swiftly homeward. Wolfe faced his garrulous grandmother again and opened his lips to speak, but she cut him off short.

"Now don't that beat the devil? She acted like as ef she was afeared ye'd bite her head off, didn't she? Atwixt me and you, Little Buck, wimmen is sawt o' strange critturs. Say, dad-burn it, you jest wait here ontel I step back yander to the aidge o' the basin and git my stick, which same I draped—it lays at that 'ar slim poplar thar—and me and you we'll go to yore pap's house."

Her grandson rode to the foot of the Lost Trail, recovered the sourwood staff and brought it to her. He dismounted

then, and the two walked toward the settlement of the Wolfes, the horse following at the end of its rein.

"And so you're a real, shore-enough officer o' the United States law!" proudly observed Granny Wolfe as they picked their way through a thin copse of sumach.

"A deputy-sheriff, made that at the special request of the new Unaka Lumber Company, of which I am general manager," said Wolfe. He went on, "It was done in order that I might better protect the company's interests in the mountains. What lucky fellow got Tot Singleton, Granny?"

"Lumber was Colonel Mason's line; I might ha' knowed it'd be yore line, too," muttered the old woman. "Hey? Now hain't Tot purty! She hain't a bit like the rest o' the Singletons. Bless yore soul, Tot hain't never married nobody! And her mighty nigh it as old as you, Little Buck. Some says one thing about that, and some another; but me, I say it's acause she han't never seed nobody 'at was quite as good as the boy who beat the devil out o' Cat-Eye Mayfield and throwed him in the creek for a-stickin' pine rawzum chewin' gum in her hair! Ye see, honey, a mountain gyurl at sixteen is mighty nigh it a woman—why, I was married at sixteen—whilst a boy at the same age is generally a durned fool. Hey?"

Wolfe laughed. "And what became of Cat-Eye Mayfield?"

"Him? Huh!" She turned up her thin old nose. "He still lives with his pap up whar the two mountains j'ines at. And he still pesters Tot half to death a-tryin' to git her to marry him. Tot she hates him wuss'n the Old Scratch. And she's been a-havin' a sight o' trouble wi' her heatherns, the same as I have wi' mine. She jest cain't stand the idee o' her people a-fightin' like they does. Some says it was Grandpap Bill Singleton 'at put it into her head; but me, I say it's jest natchelly the goodness of her, Little Buck.

"I know you've come back to he'p yore people, Little Buck," Granny Wolfe ran on. "You seed whar at yore duty laid. Well, we've got me and you, and Tot and her grandpap, on the right side o' the fence. But we'll have a awful time of it, shore. Yore pap he's turrible, turrible! It's alius him who begins the fightin' atwixt us and the Singletons. Them Singletons, 'cept Tot and her grandpap, the Prophet, is as quick to fight as a wildcat; but they don't never take the fust step at it never."

Twilight, soft and peaceful, had set in when the pair arrived at Old Buck's low and rambling log cabin.



Standing or sitting here and there in the yard, all of them grave and silent, was a score of men of the name Wolfe—one of their unwritten laws was that when an outsider married a Wolfe he lost his surname and took that of his wife; it was like that with the Singletons, too, that other wild,

princely clan. The house was packed with women and children; and they, also, were grave and silent, save for one babe in arms that whimpered softly because its mother wouldn't give it the clock for a plaything.

The returned son of the Wolfe chief threw his horse's rein over one of the rotting gateposts, and entered the yard with his grandmother limping close behind him.

"I'll bet ye cain't guess who this here feller is!" the old woman chuckled—and told them in the same breath. "It's Little Buck!"

Little Buck had been recognized already. The clan favored him with one quick, sharp glance. There was no other demonstration just then.

Young Wolfe stopped before the doorstep, on which his huge, gaunt father sat as still as a stone image. Old Buck's elbows rested on his knees; his bearded chin was almost hidden in his great, knotty hands. The son who had been named for him saw that a tiny streak of dried blood ran from a wound somewhere under his left shirtsleeve straight to the point of his left little finger.

Then the man of the officer's shield put out his hand and said cordially, "How are you, father?"

The clan leader seemed not to have heard. The silence became oppressive. Little Buck Wolfe's lips quivered, and he saw his father dimly. Granny Wolfe made a choking sound in her leathery throat, and raised her sourwood staff threateningly.

"Buck Wolfe, you old fool," clipped her quick tongue, "you git right up from thar and shake hands wi' yore own flesh and blood, him 'at is a credit to you and me and

every other Wolfe 'at ever slapped the face o' the earth wi' a shoe-bottom."

The stern old mountaineer did not even change his stare.

"How are you, father?" again.

Wolfe the elder suddenly leaped to his feet, seized Little Buck's hand and wrung it savagely, and growled, "I'm all right, damn it; how're you?"

"All right," very quietly. Little Buck's face had brightened.

His mother, who never dared to speak ahead of her iron-hearted husband, came out to meet him then. He kissed her reverently on the forehead, and it brought to her mind an avalanche of memories of happier days; she stole hurriedly back into the cabin, in order that the menfolk might not see signs of the weakness that had come over her. Her son began a round of handshaking with his kinsmen. The ice was broken.

"Nath," bellowed the old clan leader, "you bring him a chair out here! The' hain't no room in the house; the wimmen and young'uns is as thick in thar as fiddlers in Tophet. Set the chair so's he can lean back ag'in the wall and rest hisself, Nath. And bring me that 'ar jug o' yaller cawn lickier out o' the cubbard, too, Nath—the visitor lickier. Boy," to Little Buck, "ye'll have to look over my cuss-fired onperliteness, I reckon. I've been so cuss-fired mad all day 'at my dang breath would wilt fullgrown pizen-vine."

He dropped back to the doorstep. A few seconds later Little Buck accepted the chair his big and bearded brother Nathan brought for him. Old Buck then drew the corncob stopper from a one-gallon jug with his teeth, and held the jug toward his fifth son. The latter refused it courteously, and it was not pressed upon him. He saw Nathan smile good humoredly.

"Mebbe you're sawt o' like me," said Nathan, as he passed the jug to his Cousin John Ike. "I got on a rip-roarin' big dido last summer—I was so loaded I wouldn't ha' knowed a lightnin'rod agent from a beauty doctor. Whilst I was in that glorious fix, I drunk a bottle o' hawg cholery medicine by mistake, and so I jest hain't had no hankerin' 'atter lickier sense."

This elicited a low rumble of laughter. The earthenware receptacle went around, and was returned to Old Buck almost empty. Old Buck raised it to a level with his eyes, looked toward Little Buck, and drawled the only toast he knew.

"Here's to you, as good as you are, and to me, as bad as I am; and as bad as I am,

and as good as you are, I'm as good as you are, as bad as I am!"

Young Wolfe only smiled. Nathan responded for him, "Drink hearty."

Old Buck went on. "When a feller can say that 'ar toast straight, he natchelly hain't loaded. I don't never 'low none o' my people to git loaded. I tests 'em by that toast; and ef they can't say it straight, I thrashes 'em. I thrashed Nath atter he'd got over his dido and his mistake last summer. Ax him, ef ye don't believe it."

Nathan pulled at his silky black beard, grinned, and changed the subject, "What'n Tophet brung ye back, Little Buck?" he asked.

The man addressed swept the half-circle before him with his eyes. They were all smiling upon him now, and he was glad indeed to note that they were disposed to be so friendly. He moistened his lips and began.

"I decided some little time ago to come back. I had heard, through Oliver, about —"

"How's Oliver?" broke in his father.

"Oliver's all right. I had heard, through Oliver, about the fighting, and I wanted to see—"

"You say Oliver he's all right?" interrupted his mother, who now stood in the doorway.

"Absolutely. The fighting didn't seem worth while to me, and I wanted—"

"I'm shore glad pore Oliver he's all right," said Oliver Wolfe's wife.

"—To see if I could do anything to stop it," Little Buck pursued doggedly. "When I was ready to start out here, I learned that the Thorntons, some of whom have owned the basin land since the days of the old North Carolina land grant, were about to sell out to some cattlemen, who



wanted the basin for grazing purposes. I investigated, and found out that the cattlemen hadn't offered a very good price because of the trouble they expected to have with the Wolfes and Singletons—"

"Them cattlemen," his father cut in grimly, "had right good hoss sense."

"Well, I knew the basin better than any of them, and I knew the coves of the inner sides of the two mountains were filled with virgin white oak and yellow poplar, timber without a peer in the world. I organized a company—lumber was Colonel

Mason's line, you know, and it's mine, also—and we bought both timber and land from mountain's crest to mountain's crest at a very reasonable figure. Then we ordered machinery for a big sawmill, a geared locomotive and cars, and enough light steel rails to run a narrow-gauge road over the six miles that lie between this point and the new C. C. & O. Railway. Everything is in our favor. The logging is all either down grade or on a level; there never was a finer location for a mill and yards than can be had here in the basin; and the little railroad can follow the creek all the way down to the C. C. & O."

A number of the faces before him had hardened. He rose; it was like him to meet the adverse on his feet.

"But I haven't told you the best of it," he went on convincingly. "I have an agreement with the other members of the company by which I am to have any of the land that I may want, when the sawing is done, at two dollars an acre, and I'm willing to pass it on to you at the same price; also, I am willing to give you all work at good wages. I say I'm willing; I mean that I'm anxious. It's for you, my own people, that I'm doing—what I'm doing."

"I want to see every Wolfe by name living in his own comfortable cottage home, on his own little farm, here in Wolfe's Basin. I want us to have a school for the children, a little church, and a post office. I want us to have an ideal community here in this, one of the finest spots on the Almighty's earth. If you'll all stick to me, we'll have it. Now, men, I want to know who's going to stick?"

The eyes of all were turned upon Old Buck Wolfe. When he spoke, he would speak for the others. He sat with his shaggy head bent, a huge and actionless figure in the deepening dusk.

"Ef we don't fall in wi' yore idee, then what?" he asked, without raising his head.

"It's like this," Little Buck told him in a very businesslike voice: "my foster-parents, the Masons, sold every dollar's worth of property they had—except their home, and they even mortgaged that as heavily as it would stand—to get money enough to back me up, such was their faith in me. I've given them my promise that they shan't lose a single penny. If I don't get your help, I—I'll have to develop the timber interest without it. But I want your help!"

"Son," and the stern old mountaineer sat up straight, "unless the' happens to be somethin' ahind of it that I cain't yit see,

we're all with ye, lock, stock, ramrod, barrel, and sights!"

"And I say God bless ye, Buck Wolfe!" cried a creaking, but happy old voice from behind him. "Nath, run to my house and let my little dawg out; he's been shet up all day, pore little devil."

Before he went in to super, the Arnold Mason that was exacted an ironclad promise from his father. Old Buck gave his word that, no matter what might happen, the Wolfes would nevermore take the first step in a fight with the Singletons.

The young general manager of the newly organized Unaka Lumber Company refused the visitor-bed that night, and crept up to his boyhood bed in the loft. His dreams were filled with dazzlingly pretty women who kept giving him back diamond rings.

IV

SHORTLY after daybreak on the following morning, Little Buck Wolfe woke, sat up, reached for his clothing—and thought of Tot Singleton. He kept thinking of her. He caught himself saying aloud as he drew on his boots that she would never have turned him down because he had a brother in the county's chain-gang. Why, Tot would have clung to him but the closer on that account!

He meant to spend the morning in looking over the central part of the basin, where the big sawmill was to be built. After breakfast was over, he talked with his father for an hour; then he set out up the creek, on foot and alone.

When he came in sight of the gnarled old willow that shaded the sandbar, he halted very suddenly. Sitting at the base of the tree was Tot! Her head was bent low, and there was an indescribable air of loneliness about her. He stood there and watched her thoughtfully for a full minute. She did not move even a finger.



He had reached a point behind a clump of blooming laurel a dozen paces from her

when she lifted her head. But she didn't look toward him. She went to dreaming again, and he was saddened by the signs of unhappiness he saw on her countenance.

Just when he was about to make his presence known to her, an angular, slouching figure stepped before her from the bushes beyond. The newcomer was dressed in run-over cowhide boots, blue denim trousers baggy at the knees and held in place by a pair of homemade suspenders, a striped cotton shirt without buttons, and a worn black hat with its rim pinned up desperado fashion in front. His black eyes were lustreless, opaque, and uncanny. His thin lips were twisted in a smile that was decidedly unpleasant.

"Hi thar, Tot!" he sneered. "Waitin' here fo' that 'ar town smarty, like ye used to, I reckon; hain't ye?"

Wolfe's strong, smooth face lost a part of its healthy color. Tot made no reply; it seemed almost that she did not know that Mayfield, her tormentor, was there.

"He throwed me in the creek oncet," Mayfield went on, "but he cain't do it now. I was jest a boy then. I'm a man now. I wisht he'd come along and try it ag'in!"

At last the young woman gave him her attention.

"Little Buck was a boy then, too," she said; "and he wasn't no bigger'n you was, neither. And he's a man now, too—you bet."

"I jest wisht he'd happen along——"

Wolfe had stepped from behind the clump of laurel, and Cat-Eye Mayfield had seen him.

"Well, Cat-Eye," Little Buck said evenly, "you've got your wish."

Mayfield's manner became one of defiance, bitterness, and desperation. He took from a pocket in his blue denim trousers a lump of sticky pine resin wrapped in a green poplar leaf; he threw the leaf aside, and in one quick movement deliberately pressed the resin deep into Tot Singleton's copper-colored hair!

And Tot, her blue eyes glowing and triumphant, had not lifted a hand to prevent it.

The mountain blood leaped madly in the heart of Little Buck Wolfe. He rushed at Mayfield like an enraged panther. His blows, the blows of a primitive man, fell upon Mayfield's sallow face like the pounding of a riveting-hammer, completely stunning him. Then he gathered the angular body up in his arms, bore it across the bar of sand, and hurled it into the water—just

as he had done on that red-letter day of his boyhood.

Mayfield crawled sullenly out on the other side, gave the man who had whipped him a look of poisonous black hate, and slouched off up the creek's bank. Wolfe watched him until he was a good hundred yards away to see that he did not find a repeating rifle somewhere in the bushes; then he turned toward Tot.

In another moment he was standing face to face with her—smiling, blushing, finely handsome, barefooted Tot Singleton. He realized that the entire repetition of the little drama of his youth lacked but the climax—a kiss from Tot as a reward for his gallantry. She was looking straight into his eyes. Her slender, sunburned hands crept slowly to his shoulders. She stood on her toes, lifted her lips, and offered him his reward.

For she had no way of knowing that he had outgrown their juvenile affair; that he was for the present heartbroken because of the shallowness of another woman. He had fought for her, and he never could have made a stronger declaration that he still cared for her—it is a law of the cave. Besides, if he hadn't come there to meet her, as of old, why had he come?

Wolfe was not without chivalry. He could not strike down, like an assassin, the glory of her beautiful eyes; it was a glory that awed him, that could have come into being only after the longing, and the faith, and the waiting of years. He bent his head, and kissed her.

But he knew it was unfair, and he blamed himself heavily. He caught her hands as they were about to clasp at the back of his neck, and put them gently from him. She stepped backward, wondering, somehow pitiful. A disc of yellow sunlight fell through the branches of the willow, and burnished the copper of her hair.

"What made you do that, Little Buck?" she asked in the tiniest of voices.

He led her to the base of the tree, and they sat down together on the pure white sand. It seemed better to tell her the whole truth, and he told her the whole truth. Of every momentous thing that had occurred to him since his going away with the Masons to be their son, he told her; and he saw on her now slightly pale face more sympathy for him than disappointment for herself. Some there are who are built for sacrifice, but more there are who are not. Tot Singleton was.

When he had finished, he took from his pocket the ring that Alice Fair had given

back to him, and showed it to her. She merely glanced at it; she knew nothing whatever of the value, intrinsic or sentimental, of diamonds.

"Ef—ef I had that fool woman here," she said, her words fairly throbbing, "I— I'd whip her!"

To Wolfe the ring was in a manner sacred because of the memories associated with it; but it was a link that bound him to something that was lost and gone, and he decided that he had best do away with that link. Perhaps his inborn pride, the pride of the hillpeople, had its influence in the matter—he smiled a mirthless little smile,



and flung the ring into the centre of the pool before him, the pool that used to be eight feet in depth and now was only two.

"And now I'll have to tell you good-by," he said, going to his feet. "I start back to Johnsville at noon, and I've a good deal of looking around to do here before I go."

Tot rose, said good-by to him, and went homeward.

A few rods down the creek, Wolfe came abruptly upon his father. The iron-hearted old hillman's face was ashen under his beard, and his black eyes were like two points of flame. He had followed his son. He had seen the kiss, from his little distance, though he had heard none of that which they said.

Old Buck waited until Tot Singleton was well out of hearing before he spoke.

"Mr. Mason," he announced, "listen to me. I said we was all with ye ef the' wasn't somethin' ahind of it 'at I couldn't see. The' is somethin' ahind of it 'at I couldn't see—mixin' up wi' that lowdown Singleton set. I promised I wouldn't start a fight with 'em no more, I know, and I won't. The feud it's dead, as dead as hell. And so are you. To me, you're dead. Acause I seed you kiss a lowdown Singleton."

"But——"

"Now le' me tell ye this here: you cain't

never darken the door of a Wolfe no more, and you cain't bring no railroad nor no sawmill into this here basin ontel atter you've killed me. You've got my word fo' that, and it's the word of a Wolfe!"

The younger man shook his head dejectedly. "Dad," he began, "you don't know what you're talking about. I——"

"Hack it off right whar you're at!" Old Buck blazed. "I don't never want to hear the sound o' yore voice no more as long as the breath o' life's in me. You're dead, so far's I'm consarned."

The son tried hard to reason, tried harder to explain, all to no avail. The unlettered giant would listen to nothing. It angered Little Buck in spite of himself.

"I've given my word, just as you've given yours," he said spiritedly; "and, as I'm a Wolfe, just as well as you are, I'll keep my word if I live. The lumber track and the mill are coming, and it doesn't greatly matter who likes it or who doesn't."

Old Buck stalked off. His son then regretted that he had lost his temper.

V

TOT SINGLETON didn't go home just then. There was nothing she could do at home. Her mother was a very strong, stout woman who didn't want any "dreamin' gyurls a-piddlin'" in her household affairs; who sometimes worked in the woods with an ax, or hoed corn, or helped to make a run of whisky; and who lightened her daily burdens by the constant whistling of old-fashioned hymns.

The young woman absentmindedly destroyed a hundred or so of black-eyed mountain daisies by pulling off their defenseless heads between her bare toes; then she went back to her shrine—it was just that to this unspoiled creature who had been half child and half woman at sixteen and was very nearly the same today.

She stood leaning against the body of the willow, and thought over all that had happened there; looked at the marks Little Buck Wolfe's high-laced boots had made in the sand, at the marks of the struggle that had been so short and so one-sided. Soon she went to the edge of the creek, and peered into the crystal water. He hadn't known about the pool's being so shallow now, when he had thrown the ring into it.

She gathered up her calico skirts in one hand, waded in, found the ring, and hastened back to the sand-bar.

Tot looked at it closely now. It spar-

kled so in the same yellow disc of sunlight that had burnished the copper of her hair a little while before; almost it hurt her eyes! Wonderment and something very different from wonderment wrote their signs alternately on her countenance. She pressed the ring on her engagement finger, and tried to imagine that it was her own engagement ring; but the iron truth wouldn't be forgotten even for a moment, and a wee smile of intense hurt came to the lips that the sweetheart of those happy other days had so recently kissed in so chivalrous a manner.

When she tried to get the ring off, it wouldn't come! Perhaps she didn't try very hard. Anyway, she laughed a little to herself, and her blue eyes were as bright as stars.

Tot Singleton went slowly up the bank of the creek, going homeward by instinct rather than by design. And she had not covered half of the mile when she met her father and the slouching young man they called Cat-Eye, both of whom were armed with rifles.



With a little gasp, she stopped suddenly and hid her left hand behind her. Her father was very angry, angrier than she had ever seen him before; she knew it the moment she saw his bearded face. It was all plain to her immediately. Mayfield had told her father that she had met one of the hated Wolfes halfway for the purpose of making love. Her face whitened with scorn.

"Well?" she asked.

"Le's see what ye've got on that 'ar third finger o' yore left hand, Louisiany," demanded Alex Singleton, slipping the butt of his repeater to the ground.

Tot remembered that she had been watching the changing colors of the stone when they came upon her. She stared silently and defiantly, and made no move toward obedience.

"It's his'n, that 'ar ring," frowned Mayfield. "He——"

"You shet yore snaky mouth!" Tot interrupted desperately.

"Le's see it, Louisiany!" Old Singleton's voice trembled now.

Still no move whatever from the young woman. The Singleton chief stepped to her, caught her left forearm in his big and sinewy hand, and brought the shining stone up near his eyes by force. The clear, pure beauty of the diamond held his attention for a few seconds; then he threw his daughter's arm from him roughly, as though the bare touch of it were a contamination.

"Take it off!" he blared.

"I—I cain't git it off!" cried Tot, a pink splotch in either of her cheeks.

"Then cut yore finger off!"

Cat-Eye Mayfield chuckled, and it maddened Tot Singleton.

"I don't want it off!" she declared.

The old mountaineer shot upward two inches. "You—you say you don't want it off?" he roared. "You say you don't want it off? By the Eternal, you shain't never take that 'ar thing into no house o' mine as long as ye live! You're the only gyrul I got, but I'd ruther bury ye, 'an to see ye wi' that 'ar damned thing on yore finger!"

Being her father's daughter, Tot also straightened. She, too, could be obstinate. She pushed the ring a little farther up. Her voice was low and pinched.

"Ef you had ha' come to me and said, 'Louisiany, honey, I'd ruther ye wouldn't wear that, I'd shorely ha' took it off don't matter how much trouble it was to me. But you a-sayin' what ye said, and the way ye said it, with Cat-Eye thar all a-grinnin' and a-gloatin'—well, pap, I shorely wouldn't be no kin to you ef I was to take it off now."

"All right. You cain't never darken the door o' none o' yore people no more," decreed Alex Singleton, shaking with a great rage. "Any o' yore kin 'at harbors ye will shore haf to reckon wi' me, and I'm a hard man to reckon with—you know that."

"I hain't a-goin' to take it off."

"All right!"

Old Singleton turned upon his heel with almost military precision, jerked his rifle into the hollow of his arm and strode away.

When he had gone, Cat-Eye Mayfield smirked and gave an exhibition of miserably poor judgment by trying to take Tot's hand. Tot struck him across the cheek so hard that her fingers left purplish red bars under the sunburn of his skin. For it was because of him that she was cast out, homeless, without a place to lay her head.

"You'd better take yoreself away from here!" She clenched her hands and stamped one little foot. "You shorely better had! I'm done wi' you a-taggin' atter me, you—you sneakin' old rattlesnake of a tattle-teller! I wouldn't marry you to save yore life and mine, too. And this is the last time I'm a-goin' to take the trouble o' tellin' ye, Cat-Eye. Git."

Mayfield quailed before the fire of her finely glittering eyes. He took a few steps backward, watching her as though he feared she would spring upon him and rend his loosely knit body to pieces; then he turned and went straight toward the foot of Lost Trail Mountain. After he had gone a hundred yards, Tot saw him make a careful examination of his rifle.

Now one doesn't examine a gun like that when he means to shoot squirrels, not when he knows already that the gun is loaded and in order. Tot Singleton fell upon the idea that Cat-Eye Mayfield meant to watch the gate for Little Buck Wolfe, and shoot him from ambush. Mayfield was as unscrupulous a man as ever drew life's breath, and this was just the thing for him to do under the circumstances, she knew.

And Little Buck would start for Johnsville at noon!

After having searched the central part of the basin in vain, she decided that to protect him from the danger would be more sensible than to try to warn him of it. Of course, she couldn't go to the Wolfes' settlement. Besides, there was a strong chance of his being killed while trying to protect himself.

In another moment she was running hard toward the nearest cabin, which was Grandpap Singleton's, and which, she thanked whatever gods there were, was not more than a quarter of a mile away; and she kept well to cover, in order that her irate father might not see her.

When she burst into the poor little house, the white-headed, white-bearded old hillman was poking the embers in the wide stone fireplace for a baked potato; he, like Granny Wolfe, lived alone and did for himself because he didn't want to be in the way. He looked around and slowly straightened his lean figure, and the fire-blackened hickory stick fell clattering from his unsteady hand.

"Tot Singleton," he demanded anxiously, "what in the name o' Fiddlin' Bob Taylor is the matter o' you?"

"I want yore old rifle, Grandpap," panted Tot.

"Now jest what're you a-plannin' to shoot wi' my old rifle, I'd like to know?"

"A rattlesnake—mebbe."

"A rattlesnake—mebbe! Heh! Take the rifle out o' the rack up thar over the mantel." He motioned toward it. "My pore old arms is so stiff and screaky wi' the rheumatiz 'at I cain't hardly reach up far enough fo' to scratch my pore old head no more."

His granddaughter stood on her bare toes and took down the long-barreled Lancaster muzzle-loader. She ignored the powderhorn and leathern bullet-pouch the Prophet had taken from a peg in the log wall and was holding out to her. The one load that was in the rifle would be enough. Tot, like the rest of the Singletons, didn't miss.

But as she turned toward the door, her grandfather caught her by an arm and held her firmly. His suspicions were at work.

"Wait, Tot, honey," he said. "You've got to tell me about it fust. It hain't no common rattler you're a-goin' to shoot—mebbe!"

She had been afraid to let him know, because of his strict religiousness. The earnest pleading, the deep love for her in his old eyes, now urged her to confide in him. She told it in a few words, for there was precious little time to be wasted.

"And so he's come back here to save his people, Little Buck has." Grandpap Singleton seemed very much affected. "I tell ye, Tot, honey, they needs him, as shorely as you're a foot high. Well, we'll he'p him ef we can. Shorely, a man ort to believe in a-fightin' fo' the right as well as prayin' for it. Heh?"

The Prophet certainly was not in one of his wandering fits now. He caught up a worn felt hat and pulled it low on his white head, and took the rifle masterfully from Tot's hands.

"Come wi' me," he ordered, almost with the snap of youth.

The pair of them hurried across the little vegetable plot, and were soon swallowed up by the trees and laurels of the mountainside.

"Ef the's any killin' to be done," muttered the aged mountaineer, "I'll do it myself. You're young, Tot, honey, whilst I'm as old, mighty nigh it, as Methusalem's house cat. But I can yit see how to shoot



purty tol'able straight. Heh! Do ye know what they used to call me fo' a nickname when I was a young man? 'Cracker,' that's what. Acause I was a crack shot. It was said I was the man who invented shootin' squirrels in the middle o' the eye!"

Considering that he had long been a sufferer from rheumatism, that scourge of the aged, the pace that Grandpap Singleton set and kept was truly surprising.

When they drew up stealthily behind a scrubby oak and peered down the Lost Trail's side of Devil's Gate, they saw just what they had expected to see. Crouched above a stone the size of a barrel, on which lay his repeating rifle on its side, was Cat-Eye Mayfield, motionless, waiting in a diabolical patience.

"We've got to ketch him mighty nigh in the act itself," whispered Grandpap Singleton, "so's the'll be enough real proof to send him to jail. We hain't got no real proof as yit, ye know, Tot. We'll jest wait here ontel he picks up his rifle, which same he'll do when Little Buck comes in sight, and 'en we'll make him put up his hands and call Little Buck up to arrest him. Heh? Shorely. He's a-plannin' to let Little Buck have it when he slows his hoss to ford the creek down thar."

Tot kept a watch on the trail below, which lay in plain view before her for several hundred yards. A few silent minutes went by; then she motioned to her kinsman to get ready.

She saw him kneel, lay the long barrel



across a moss-covered stone, rest one shoulder against the scrubby oak's body, and bend his head until his right cheek touched the rifle's stock. After he had trained the old weapon properly, he raised his white head and turned his eyes upward without spoiling his aim; and

Tot heard him speak in the lowest of undertones:

"Lord, ef I haf to do it, You'll understand, won't Ye? And ef I am in the wrong, which I'm purty shore I hain't, I ax Ye to fo'give me. Aymen."

The young woman wiped a dimness from her blue eyes, and looked toward the trail again. She bent and whispered nervously:

"He's a-comin' fast. He hain't more'n a hundred steps from the Gate. Now you watch Cat-Eye Mayfield, Grandpap Singleton, and don't you let him k-k-kill Little Buck!"

"You leave it to me!"

Mayfield picked up his rifle, drew the hammer back, and began to settle himself like a cat settling for a spring.

"Drap that 'ar gun, Cat-Eye!" cried Grandpap Singleton.

Tot pulled aside a laurel branch, in order that the would-be assassin might see the frowning muzzle that bore upon him. Mayfield was in no haste to turn his sallow face toward them; he looked at them only long enough to see who they were, and did not drop his rifle. Perhaps it was because he did not believe the religious old man would shoot; perhaps it was because his thirst for revenge was so great at that moment that his narrow mind had in it no room for any other thought.

"Drap that rifle, Cat-Eye!" Grandpap Singleton cried again.

Still Mayfield did not obey. The horseman was now almost to the ford, and reining in. Mayfield's round head seemed to sink halfway into his shoulders—he began to look along the sights.

"Shoot!" Tot urged frantically.

The old Lancaster cracked like a giant's whip. Cat-Eye Mayfield dropped his rifle now. He turned a dumfounded, ashen face toward the two Singletons, and babbled something unintelligible. Then—although the bullet had only passed through the upper part of his right arm, thanks either to Providence or to a dimness in the old mountaineer's eyes—Mayfield sank to the stones. The sight of his own blood had made him limp.

The Prophet rose unsteadily. The strain on his feeble mind was telling. He stretched wide his lean arms, and the bright sun threw his shadow down the incline in the form of an inverted cross.

He called to the man in the Gate, "Come up here, Little Buck Wolfe," thickly, "and arrest me fo' mudder!"

VI

AT THE sound of the shot, Wolfe looked up quickly. He saw the gaunt old man go tottering to his feet, saw Tot standing with her hands

clutching at her calico dress below her throat; but because of the creek's dashing he did not hear the Prophet's agonized cry. Wolfe dismounted, fastened his horse's reins to a sapling, and hurried up the rocky steep.

The young woman and her grandparent had come down to where Mayfield lay groaning.

"He hain't dead," said Tot. "He's jest bad hurt. And you'd shore better take him along to town with ye, Little Buck, and jail him, ef ye don't want to be ambushed some other time."

Poor old Grandpap Singleton fell to his knees beside the man he had shot. "He hain't dead!" he rejoiced. "He hain't dead!" His hands were clasped against his hollow breast. His joy was even more pathetic than his grief had been before it.

Wolfe understood fully. He touched the now quiet figure on the ground with the toe of his boot.

"Get up!" he ordered.

Mayfield rose, his right arm hanging limp at his side. Wolfe ripped the shirt-sleeve from the injured member, folded one of his own white handkerchiefs and placed it over the wound, and used the torn-out sleeve for a bandage. Mayfield, who was fast recovering from his fit of weakness, watched every move of the deft, strong fingers with old hatred in his lusterless, uncanny eyes.

The first-aid work was barely finished

when the high-pitched voice of Granny Wolfe came from a point a few rods above:

"La, la, la! And so ye got him, durn him, did ye, Grandpap Bill Singleton!"

She limped down to them, her little dog, Wag, happy at her heels.

"Ye needn't to mind a-tellin' me about it, Bill Singleton," she chattered, "a-

cause I already know, me a-bein' a good guesser. And so the rawzum-chawin' devil's pup—was a goin' to layway Little Buck, was he? You, Cat-Eye Mayfield,

quit that a-lookin' at me like as ef ye could bite my whole head off."

She turned toward her grandson, who greeted her gravely.

"I tried to find you before I left," he said, and then told her of his father's change of heart.

"Consarn his old fool hide!" the old woman exploded.

Wolfe picked up Mayfield's rifle, threw the loaded cartridge out of the chamber, and let the hammer down carefully. Then he held the weapon out toward Tot Singleton.

"Take that home with you," he requested. "Mayfield can get it when he comes back."

Tot didn't take the rifle. Her lower lip began to quiver, and she looked away. "But I cain't never go home no more, Little Buck," she murmured.

"You can't go home!" he exclaimed in amazement.

She told him haltingly why. A very little smile curled Wolfe's mouth at the corners.

"So you, too, are an outcast," he said, half-sympathetically, half-resentfully. "But don't feel so badly about it! We always have our compensations, little girl. I wonder if—will you go along with me, Tot?"

She answered simply, "I'd go anywhar with you."

Grandpap Singleton took the rifle. Granny Wolfe addressed her kinsman:

"Ef you're a-goin' to town, you'd shore better start. I seed yore pap's old blue-tailed hen a-settin' on the fence a-pickin' her feathers this mornin', and I've heerd two treefrogs a-hollerin', and them's all good signs o' rain."

Wolfe shook hands with the two old people, and escorted his prisoner and her who had been his boyhood sweetheart down to the Gate trail, where his horse stood pawing the black earth impatiently.

"Get in the saddle, Cat-Eye," he said. "You're not able to walk."

"I hain't a-goin' to Johnsville—" Mayfield began, when Wolfe tapped his deputy's badge with a forefinger and cut in, "Get in the saddle!"

He pushed his coat back far enough to reveal the butt of a revolver that the high sheriff had found for him and urged him to wear. Mayfield obeyed awkwardly and ungraciously. With Tot Singleton walking trustfully beside him, Wolfe led the horse down the winding Gate trail, which soon entered a dark green tunnel formed



of laurel, giant ferns, and hemlock branches.

When they had put three miles behind them, Wolfe said to his companion, "I suppose you've guessed where I'm taking you."

"Yes," with a sidewise glance of admiration at his clearcut profile. "You're a-takin' me to them folks who 'dopted you, over in town. And ef they can make me over into the same sawt they made you into, I—I'll swaller all o' my feelin's ag'inst bein' a charity object, and he'p 'em all I can."

"That's the spirit!" he said with a good deal of enthusiasm. "You stick to that!"

Wolfe hired a light vehicle at the first farmhouse, and they reached quiet, lazy Johnsville an hour after the fall of darkness. It was a fine, starry night; contrary to Granny Wolfe's prediction, it hadn't



rained. They went straight to the big, old-fashioned white house of the Masons, which lifted its gables so proudly above its setting of maples that one was inclined to wonder whether it wasn't scoffing at the heavy mortgage that was upon it!

The colonel and his wife were sitting on the unlighted veranda. He was tall, straight, gallant, courteous. She was rather little, gentle, sweet, a born mother who had never had any children. They were of the old South.

"Father," said the adopted son, as the trio reached the foot of the veranda steps, "here's a man with a pretty bad arm. Call Doctor Rice, won't you?"

Colonel Mason didn't wait to ask questions. He ran toward the phone, switching on the veranda lights as he passed through the hallway. The trio walked up the steps. Tot Singleton blinked in the strange white glow that shone from two frosted globes on the veranda ceiling. Cat-Eye Mayfield glared like an animal in a corner. Wolfe approached Mrs. Mason, who was at the same time approaching him.

"This is Miss Singleton, mother," he said. "I—I thought you wouldn't mind caring for her a little while as you cared for me for so long."

The colonel's little wife turned to Alex

Singleton's daughter, took her hands, bent forward and kissed her on the brow. Tot stared; then a tear traced a crooked line down the road-dust of either cheek. No other woman had ever kissed her, not even her own stout, whistling mother, that she remembered. In that instant her whole weary, fiery mountain heart gave itself in everlasting love and devotion to Mrs. Mason.

"Let's go into the house, dear," softly said the older woman.

They went in. The colonel hastened back to the veranda.

"Rice is coming," he announced. To Mayfield, "Please sit down, sir."

The three of them sat down. The colonel slyly studied the wounded man's face, and he found it interesting. Soon the doctor arrived.

Rice dressed the hillman's arm in record time, and was paid on the spot for his services—by the young fellow he had always known as Arnold Mason. Wolfe then went with Mayfield into the dining-room, where they had supper. Immediately after they had finished the meal, Mayfield was shown to a bedroom upstairs and in the back half of the house.

"Don't bother to run away," and Wolfe smiled a very pleasant smile. "You may go home tomorrow. I won't give you any trouble over trying to pot me; you see, I understand fully just how hard a prison term is for any mountain man! You won't try to do me harm in the future, will you? I want you to promise me that."

"Shore," Mayfield nodded. "I promise. You're a good feller, Little Buck, a dang good feller."

Mayfield had expected anything but mercy. But he was not too bewildered to grind his teeth and fling a vile, whispered curse at the door when Wolfe closed it behind him.

When Wolfe went back to the veranda, the lights had been cut off to keep away a swarm of annoying summer beetles. He saw that the colonel and a slender figure in white sat in rockers near the front steps.

"Miss Singleton—who wants me to call her Tot, like everybody else does—" began Colonel Mason, "has told me about the difficulties you had and—er, expect to have. It looks bad, Arnold; there's no denying it. You can't arrest and imprison your own people, of course. Frankly, I don't quite see how you're going to manage it, son."

Wolfe stepped to the veranda post and put his back to it.

"You've always believed in me," he said earnestly. "I want you to continue to believe in me. I'm not to the barrier yet. There are six miles of narrow-gauge road to be built before the barrier is reached—the Devil's Gate, you know. No use worrying over things in the distance, father, eh? This is what I've got to do—when I get to the barrier, I'll cross it, or go under it, around it, or through it. I don't know how. I know only that it must be done."

"By George, sir!" The colonel brought a hand down on his knee for emphasis. "Of course, I'll keep faith in you! That pass—the Devil's Gate—was beautifully named, wasn't it? But there's one thing, Arnold, I must ask you to remember. That your life is of more value to us, infinitely, than our money. Don't forget it, son."

There followed a few minutes of silence save for the night song of a mocking bird somewhere in the maples. Then Tot Singleton, who now wore shoes and stockings and a white dress that Mrs. Mason had found for her, sat up straight in her chair and addressed the dimly-shining officer's shield.

"Let me tell you, Little Buck," she said, "you'll shorely wish you'd put Cat-Eye Mayfield in jail the minute you got to town. I'd bet my life ag'in a safety-pin 'at Cat-Eye Mayfield ain't in the house right now. As long as he can go whar he pleases, yore life ain't wo'th nothin'. I tell you, after you've done what you've done tonight fo' him, he'd foller you to the bottomest hole in Tophet to git to shoot you in the back. Hate you? Why, he's hated you ever sence he can rickollect. It's all the 'is to him, that hate fo' you. As Grandpap Singleton says, the sourest vinegar in the world is made out o' molasses—a-meanin', o' course, hate made out o' l-love. Cat-Eye thinks he l-loves me, y' know—"

If the lights had been on, they would have seen that she was blushing terribly; she had made a bad mess, she thought, of telling them how it was.

The last word had barely left her lips when there came from the velvety darkness of the lawn the voice of an eavesdropper, a snake, Mayfield himself, who had stolen out by way of the back stairs:

"Ef ever she told the truth in all o' her borned days, Little Buck Wolfe, she told it then. Ye might as well make yore fun'ral 'rangements afore ye come into the

hills ag'in, because I'll certainly git you!"



Wolfe ran down the steps and disappeared in the blackness. Colonel Mason flashed on the veranda lights, and brought out a shotgun. But Mayfield and the night were too

closely akin, and they failed to catch even a glimpse of him.

"I have always held out," muttered the colonel, when they had again gathered on the veranda, "that there was no man without a little that was good somewhere in his make-up. I admit now that I was mistaken."

Little Mrs. Mason came out then. She put a hand on Tot's arm.

"I've got a room ready for you upstairs," she said. "Would you like to go to bed now? You must be pretty tired." "Yes'm," Tot replied absentmindedly.

She displayed no interest whatever in the beautiful blue-and-white bedroom that the good woman at her side told her to consider her own. She barely noticed the dainty nightdress that Mrs. Mason took from a drawer and hung across the back of a chair for her. Wondering at her sudden abstraction, the colonel's wife smiled a gentle, "Good night, my dear!" and left her to herself.

Tot Singleton was thinking of Mayfield. She had long ago given up trying to stop hating him; he wouldn't let her stop hating him. For years he had dogged her like a shadow; she hadn't been able to go anywhere, it seemed, without his following her. A thousand times he had profaned the sacred spot under the whispering willow—with his feet, with his voice, with his opaque and uncanny eyes, with his thoughts. Over and over she had tried to insult him, in order that she might be rid of him; but there was, apparently, nothing about him that could be insulted. No, he wouldn't let her leave off hating him!

And now Mayfield was free again; free to wait in the laurels beside the trail, or behind a stone above it, with his coward's soul red with the spirit of murder, and a rifle in his hands.

Little Buck Wolfe would go to the mountains in the morning to bring Mayfield back; he would be shot from ambush; the cost of his kindness and his fearlessness would be his life. She was absolutely

sure of it, and her conclusion was certainly not far-fetched. Well, she would save Wolfe again. She was one of the very few persons in the world who could approach Cat-Eye Mayfield, now that he knew the hand of the law was against him, without great danger of being killed. She herself would arrest Cat-Eye. If he didn't submit to arrest, she would—but he would submit. It would be easy enough to find him. The mountains and their dense forests were as an open book to her; no man of the Wolfes Basin country knew them better.

To the outsider, the decision of this unlettered, but strong-souled young daughter of the hills is perhaps rather startling. But to Tot there was nothing so very extraordinary about it. To her, duty was duty, and nothing more—or less.

When Mrs. Mason rapped lightly at the door of the blue-and-white bedroom on the following morning, she received no response. She opened the door and went in, and found the bed not only empty, but undisturbed. Shortly afterward, the colonel's wife found that Tot's calico dress was gone; and in its place lay the white garments and the shoes and stockings that Tot had worn the evening before.

Mrs. Mason hurried downstairs and met Wolfe in the hallway. He seemed anxious.

"Mother," his voice troubled, "when I woke this morning, my revolver was gone from my holster, and the deputy shield from my coat. What do you suppose became of them? Do you think Mayfield—?"

"I believe I can explain, Arnold," she interrupted breathlessly. "The girl, too, is gone!"

"After Mayfield!" he cried.

"I have no doubt of it, Arnold. She probably thinks your officer badge gives her plenty of authority!"

VII

THERE was a heavy step on the veranda. A big and poorly-dressed man, wearing a sunburned black beard and carrying a rifle by its muzzle, appeared on the threshold.

"Whar's my little gyurl?" he asked jerkily.

The colonel's wife looked with instant pity upon him. There was something very forlorn about Alex Singleton, the repentant. His gaunt and haggard face, his ragged clothing, his run-over cowhide boots, all were covered with the dust of travel.

Just under his eyes, which were wide and hungry-looking, his cheeks were mottled faintly, and it was chiefly by this pathetic little token that Mrs. Mason read the story of his remorseful sorrow. He stared straight at her; he appeared to be wholly unaware of the presence beside her of old Buck Wolfe's son.

"Whar is she at?" he asked again, this time almost in a whisper.

"She went back to the hills last night," Mrs. Mason answered kindly.

"I'd ort to be shot fo' a-runnin' her off," muttered Alex Singleton. In louder tones, "Might I ax ye fo' a big drink o' whisky, mis'?"



Mrs. Mason's eyes twinkled. "I think we have some. Sit down and wait, and I'll go for it."

It was then that she noticed that his left shirtsleeve had been ripped open to the shoulder; that a raw-hide thong did service as a tourniquet just above his left elbow; and that his left forearm, wrist and hand were swollen and discolored.

"Copperhead bit me as I was a-creepin' through a fence jest outside o' town," the mountaineer explained apologetically. "Got me afore I knowed it was anywhar nigh me. That's what I wanted with a big drink o' whisky, mis', it a-bein' good fo' snakebite."

"Oh, you must have Doctor Rice!" the little woman cried frightenedly. Already she was fairly pushing him toward a veranda chair that Wolfe had hurriedly provided; he sat down as obediently as a child would have done. "Arnold, phone Doctor Rice—"

"But there's no time to be lost in waiting for Rice, mother," said Wolfe. "Look at that arm! I can treat snakebite; I've got some potassium permanganate that I bought to take to the hills with me—"

He ran to his bedroom and returned with a small bottle. Alex Singleton rose angrily.

"I hain't a-goin' to let you do it!" he declared.

"You'll have to," replied Wolfe. "You don't want to die, do you?"

"But thar's whisky—"

"Whisky," old Buck Wolfe's-son interrupted, "is as bad as it is good. It stimulates the heart action, but it spreads the poison through the system rapidly. This

permanganate—we just cut right through the marks of the fangs with a knife; then we draw out as much poison as will come; then we fill the wounds with this stuff, and pretty soon you'll be as good as new. You see, you evidently got the tourniquet on quick, which is a big thing."

"Me, a Singleton, and you, a Wolfe?" The mountain man was suffering much. He was a stranger in a strange land, dazed and bewildered, and heart-broken because of his treatment of his only daughter. He weakened.

"You'd do that fo' me, a Singleton? Ef you would, I hain't a-goin' to be lowdown enough to keep ye from it. Yank out yore knife and cut the whole danged arm off, Little Buck, ef ye want to!"

He held out the swollen, discolored hand. Wolfe took a sharp knife from his pocket, and with it split the fang-marks two ways. With his mouth he succeeded in drawing out some of the virulent yellow poison. After that he filled the wounds with permanganate crystals. The colonel came up and tried to help.

"We'll loosen your thong at intervals," smiled Wolfe. "There's some poison in that arm that the permanganate won't reach, but it won't hurt much if we let it into the circulation a little at a time. It's the shock of the whole dose, you know, that kills."

Some hours later, the leader of the Singletons put out his good right hand.

"Boy," he said with a great deal of feeling, "you've got one friend, anyhow, which no time, nor no change, nor no thing on earth can ever take away from ye. I want ye to shake wi' me, Little Buck."

They shook.

"Now will ye please tell me, ef ye know," Singleton went on, "how come it Louisiany left here in the night?"

Wolfe told him briefly.

"Cat-Eye Mayfield!" growled the big hillman. "Well, I reckon I'm a-goin' to haf to kill Cat-Eye sometime. Goodness knows I hates to do it, but fo' pore little Louisiany I will, as shore as green apples. Le' me tell ye this here, folks—thar's the lowdownest man 'at ever stuck a boot-track on the face o' the world."

After two more hours, the rawhide thong was removed entirely. Singleton's constitution was like iron. He rose, and took up his rifle and hat.

"I guess I'll be a-movin' toward home," he drawled softly. "I feel good enough to thrash my weight in wildcats now. I shore won't fo'git this."

"Better wait until tomorrow," advised the always hospitable colonel.

"I'll go with you," said Wolfe. "Tot may need help, you know. We'll separate at the Gate, in order that my people—"

"No!" old Alex broke in stoutly. "You cain't go to the mountains now. Mayfield would be plumb shore to snipe ye off, plum' shore. You must stay here fo' three days, at least. I tell you, I knows jest edactly what I'm a-talkin' about, Little Buck."

"But he wouldn't have got away, if I hadn't been such a boob!" frowned Wolfe. "It's up to me, as the saying is, to bring him back."

Singleton shook his head. "Oh, no! Ef I'm a-goin' to be yore friend, you must le' me have my way about it. Don't be a-skeered but what Louisiany can take blamed good keer o' herself. Cat-Eye, he wouldn't hurt her, anyhow. He knows me too dang well to hurt her. And so good-by to ye all!"

Half a minute later, he had left the house and was hurrying toward the great, dim-blue ranges.

The young general manager of the new Unaka Lumber Company began immediately the building of his toy railroad. Before twilight of the next day, more than a dozen tents had been staked on a level spot



near where Wolfes Creek flowed under the C. C. & O., and the mountain air was filled with the songs of weary negro laborers. Early on the following morning, under the supervision of a young foreman named Weaver, the narrow roadbed began to creep toward the basin.

The hills everlastingly rang with the staccato of the axe, the keen tenor of the saw, and the low bass thunder of exploding dynamite as tree after tree and ledge after ledge of stone fell victims of the hand of progress.

Late in the afternoon of the day following, Wolfe left the work entirely in charge of his foreman, and started to Johnsville for news. No person had passed by way of the trail that led down

the creek from Devil's Gate, but those for whom he had been watching might possibly have taken another trail.

He found no news awaiting him in Johnsville. Nothing more had been seen or heard of the Singletons or of Mayfield. Wolfe feared that some evil had befallen Tot. Before he went to bed that night, he decided that he would be in the hills at daybreak on a search for her.

Colonel Mason wished to accompany his foster-son, but he awoke too late. Whereupon he gallantly wagered his wife a silk dress against a peach pie that he would overtake Arnold before he reached Devil's Gate—and he won the peach pie.

VIII

A SLENDER, barefooted feminine figure in a torn and bedraggled, blue-dotted calico dress stood motionless behind the twisted body of a wind-swept jackpine on the crest of a baby mountain miles from Wolfe's Basin. Her face was thin from starving, and her coppery hair matted and tangled, but in the depths of her blue eyes there was fire. An Army-type revolver hung heavily from her right hand. Over her heart shone an officer's shield. She was slyly watching the side of another baby mountain, on the crest of which lay lightly the dying, golden summer sun.

The yellow disc sank out of sight, and shadows began to thicken in the valley before her. Still she stood motionless behind the wind-swept pine, too full of her purpose to sit down and rest. Darkness came on out of the east, and a little brown owl somewhere below her cried a mournful welcome to it. A nighthawk cut the air over her head with its knife-sharp wings; its shriek was like the dying note of a steamer's siren. From far across the other mountain came the shrill sound of a panther's scream, imitating the call of a woman in mortal distress.

Then there was silence, a deep and awesome silence. The earth, the sky, and all between, formed one vast and hollow loneliness. But Tot did not feel it. She herself was loneliness.

At last she sat down on the pine needles. Her weariness, the weariness of long hours of tramping without food, of long vigils on mountain tops, forced her to rest. What a game of hide-and-seek it had been! Half a dozen times she had been almost upon him. His way of eluding her was both uncanny and maddening. He had really seemed to be enjoying it!

Again the owl cried out; again the nighthawk shrieked; again the panther screamed. And again did Tot Singleton pay no attention to the gruesome trinity.

Some time later, she saw on the side of the other mountain a tiny point of light. It brought a cold but triumphant smile to her lips. How sure of himself he was! She rose, and began to move swiftly and noiselessly down through the scrubby laurel and ivy, going as straight toward the point of light as the slopes of the valley would allow.



After nearly an hour, she divided a wall of rank green undergrowth and stepped into a little, round patch of huckleberry bushes, in the center of which was a small brushwood fire—and beyond the fire, eating berries, his rifle lying across his knees, sat Cat-Eye

Mayfield, who also was pale and haggard. He looked up. His jaws stopped their movement as though they had been that moment paralyzed. He stared at her half-defiantly and half-reproachfully.

She went closer to him, the big revolver ready in her hand, her gaze riveted on his.

"You're onder arrest fo' tryin' to kill Little Buck Wolfe," she said in a low voice that carried the ring of ice. With the forefinger of her left hand she pointed to the officer's shield that she wore over her heart like a target and a dare.

"Ye don't say!" he sneered.

"But I do say!" she replied.

"Deputy-Sheriff Tot Singleton!" grinned Mayfield.

"C'rect, sir!" boldly. "It's jest what I am. I'll haf to ax ye to pass that 'ar rifle across to me, Mister Cat-Eye."

"Humph!" scornfully.

"Pass me that 'ar rifle, butt fust—pass it, quick!"

Mayfield saw, or imagined he saw, her finger tighten on the trigger. He gave her the gun, butt first, reluctantly. She lifted it in her left hand and brought it down hard on a stone, disabling the mechanism of the breech. Mayfield muttered an oath

and leaped to his feet, but the revolver's muzzle held him off.

"You better hadn't!" she warned, her finger now so hard on the trigger that the cylinder trembled. "I've got the whole United States ahind o' me now, and I shore hain't afeared to shoot. Ef you think I am, try me and see!"

The other prepared to play his last card. He had some faith in it. He tucked his thumbs under his home-made suspenders, and cocked his bullet-shaped head to one side.

"We've had a fine time a-playin' whoopy-hide, hain't we?" He tried to laugh, and failed. "But it's all come to a show-down now, I reckon. You've sp'iled it all; the fun's all over. Tot Singleton, you won't want me to go to jail when I've told ye what I've got to tell ye!"

"Tell it!" impatiently.

"All right. Well," leered Mayfield, "you rickollect 'at time me and yore pap went over to Shelton Laurel and stayed a week at the big shootin'-match, sev'ral year ago? And you rickollect yore pap acted pow'ful strange fo' a long time atter we'd got back? It was the talk o' the whole Singleton tribe. You rickollect, Tot?"

"Yes. Shorely," she nodded. "Git the rest of it out o' ye quick."

"All right. Well, yore pap he killed a man named Mort Gibson over thar," Cat-Eye Mayfield went on, "and I seed him do it. I was the only witness. I'm the only pusson on earth 'at knows who done it—'ceptin' yore pap. Take me to jail, and I'll shore tell who it was killed Mort Gibson. Then yore pap he'll land in the peniterichy even ef he don't hang!"

Tot Singleton saw light in a place that had been mysteriously dark to her for years.

"So that," she cried, shaken hard, "is why pap never would make you stop a-pesterin' me to marry you! He was afeard to make you mad, acause he was afeard you'd tell! But," with fine scorn, "he knowed he could trust me never to tie up to sech as you, o' course. Do ye reckon, Cat-Eye Mayfield, they'd take yore word about the killin', and you in jail?"

"Tumph! I'd jest tell 'em to ax yore pap about it, and he'd give hisself away. He hain't got over it yit. It's nigh driv' him crazy."

It was all too true. Then the young woman's countenance took on an expression that fascinated Mayfield because he couldn't begin to guess what it meant.

"You turn yore back to me, quick!" she ordered.

The revolver threatened. The firelight gleamed on the deputy's badge she wore. Mayfield lost faith in his last card. He turned his back to Tot, and bent his head dejectedly. She stepped to him, gripped the waistband of his blue denim trousers in her left hand, and shoved him forward.

"Move on!" she said, bleakly but desperately, and he moved on. "Try anything I don't like the looks of, and see ef I don't shoot—then you cain't tell on pap. I—I've got the whole United States ahind o' me now."

THEY reached the crest of a high and rugged mountain just before daybreak. Tot decided to halt there and wait for the dawn to show her the surrounding country, in order that she might get her bearings again.

When the gray light came, she found that the great pile of earth and stone under her feet was the Big Blackfern, the eastern wall of Wolfe's Basin!

"Listen, Cat-Eye," she said wearily. "This is what we're a-goin' to do. We're a-goin' straight down the mountainside to the aidge o' the basin; then we're a-goin' to sneak out to the right under cover o' the trees ontel we're to the Gate. Anything about that you don't onderstand?"

"Yes," growled her prisoner, "I onderstand ye."

"Rickollect, ef you try to run, I'll shoot."

She released her hold on his clothing, now that he no longer had darkness for a friend. She followed him doggedly, fighting for strength to keep on her feet. Before they were halfway to the basin's edge, she was stumbling, and the trees were beginning to run



grotesquely together like drunken monsters, and there was in her eyes a light closely akin to that of delirium. Mayfield knew that she soon would be completely exhausted, and upon this he was depending for his escape. Now and then he cast a sly glance over his shoulder, and with each succeeding glimpse of her his countenance grew a degree less heavy.

When they had come to a point a hundred yards from the level ground of the basin's bottom, Mayfield halted suddenly and began to stare ahead of him. His captor thrust the muzzle of the revolver weakly against his back. Still he didn't move. His immobility was like that of an evil bird that a snake holds charmed.

"Go on!" mumbled Tot. "Go on!"

"Looky thar!" exclaimed Mayfield. He pointed.

"What is it?"

She saw that they were standing at the lower side of the family burying-ground of the Wolfes.

"Thar!" Mayfield growled, pointing again.

At last she saw. "It was you," she gasped, "that done it!"

A thick, black mist was already settling down before her. She couldn't see anything at all now. Mayfield seized the revolver and tore it from her weakened grip. She made no attempt to recover it, for nothing mattered; the universe had become one great, dark void; it was finished. She staggered and fell prostrate, with her arms flung out helplessly. There she lay quite still, with the officer's shield pressed close to the earth and no more like a target, no more like a dare.

In the basin below were two men, one of whom was mounted, who had been watching with rising interest the progress of the pair down the rugged slope of the Blackfern. They had recognized Tot and Mayfield only when the latter-named halted suddenly and pointed; captor and captive had come into plain view at that moment.

Colonel Mason uttered an exclamation that was half-oath, and spurred his horse forward. The man on foot also was an elderly man, and he was tired and worn from days and nights of fruitless searching through the mountain wilderness. He thought that Mayfield had struck Tot down. He choked back a sob and cried out a whole oath instead, and ran, not toward his daughter, his one little girl, but after Cat-Eye Mayfield.

The colonel dismounted and with infinite tenderness gathered Tot's limp body up from the new mound of black earth on which it had fallen. He shook his head sorrowfully, regretfully, at sight of the new slab of sandstone that had been put at the head of the mound only that morning.

For on it had been chiseled crudely this pitiful inscription:

Hear Lays Little Buck Wolfe

IX

GRANNY WOLFE had signally failed to soften her son, Old Buck. She had talked to him until she was hoarse, now pleading, now threatening him, now browbeating him with her sharp and ready tongue. Several times he had walked off to keep from hearing her; twice he had seized his fiddle and gone to playing "Buffalo Gals" wildly to shut her up.

But her spirits were not so low this morning. She had put on her red flannel petticoat wrong side out by mistake, and that certainly meant better luck in the future. It was a sign that never failed.

She had gone out, with her little black dog at her heels, to weed a bed of sky-colored ragged-robins. Her gaze sought out the not far distant family burying-ground instead. That which she saw caused her to drop her sourwood staff and step on her little dog's foot.

"Wag, ye black devil!" she creaked in response to the canine howl.

She recovered her staff, took her clay pipe from her almost toothless jaws, shaded her eyes with one hand, and looked toward the side of the Blackfern again. That which she had seen before had become an indistinct blur.

"I wonder what!" she muttered.

The eyes of Old Buck Wolfe were keener. He threw a last clod at a marauding hen, snatched up his always ready rifle, and hurried toward the mountain.

As he passed his mother's cabin, she hailed him shrilly, "Wait thar, and I'll go 'long wi' ye!"

He didn't even turn his head.

"You'd ort to be skun alive!" and she limped after him, Wag following at her heels.

COLONEL MASON looked for water with which to revive Tot and, it being unfamiliar territory to him, failed to find any. Wondering whether he could mount unassisted with the young woman in his arms, he went back to his horse. Then he saw, standing less than two rods away, as motionless as the trees about him, the bearded, hard-eyed, giant mountaineer, Old Buck Wolfe.

"You're a terrible man, Buck," the colonel observed bitingly.

Wolfe changed not one feature.

"Will you be so kind, sir," and the old Southerner's voice was now not so cold,

"as to hold this girl until I can get on my horse, and then pass her up to me?"



Still no word, no move, from the hillman. His mother arrived, panting heavily. She went straight to Colonel Mason. A great deal was plain to her already.

"Le' me take keer o' Tot," she said, fumbling at the bandana corners that were knotted under her chin, "ontel you can chase out the mountain thar about half a quarter and wet this here handkercher in a little spring ye'll find. Hey?"

The colonel returned not long afterward with the bandana soaking wet. Tot opened her eyes the moment the water touched her face. Granny Wolfe smiled, swept the matted and tangled hair back from the high, smooth brow and crooned:

"Now don't you worry yore little self no more, Tot, honey. Why, the' hain't a blessed thing to worry about! Little Buck ain't dead at all! His pap thar, the cross-grained old fool, he made that 'ar grave thar, and set up a tombstone to it, as a sign to the whole world 'at his best son was dead to him. Don't ye see, Tot, honey? Why, it's as plain as yore nose!"

"Cat-Eye didn't kill him?" Tot breathed uncertainly.

"Shorely not!" the old woman assured her.

"I thought Cat-Eye—had got him," Tot mumbled weakly, and slowly closed her eyes.

Colonel Mason rose and faced Old Buck Wolfe squarely.

"You could be a mighty good man," said he, "if you would. I know you've got plenty of chances to be bad; still, that's a very fine reason why you shouldn't be. I tell you, sir, there's nothing much coming to the fellow who is good simply because he hasn't any chance to be bad—and don't you ever forget that. Come, now! Help your son instead of hindering him. Be what you ought to be to him. You owe him your—"

"I don't owe nobody nothin'!" cut in the man who kept his word, told the truth,

and paid his debts; who bent his knees only to a woodchuck's den, a ginseng root, or the furnace of a moonshine still; and who believed in nothing that he couldn't see with his temporal eyes.

Old Kirby Mason drew himself up straight, as straight as he had stood at Chickamauga when a general had complimented him to his face. But he was pale now, instead of flushed.

"By George, sir!" he bellowed.

With that he sprang to the head of the new black mound, tore away the slab of sandstone, lifted it in both hands and brought it down hard against the stump of a tree, breaking it into half a dozen pieces. The mountaineer went toward him, his rifle ready. The colonel looked into the barrel of the weapon without flinching.

"You ort to be hung as high as Haman or higher, Buck Wolfe!" the old woman cried. "You go home! Some says a old fool is the biggest fool on earth, and some says a young fool is the biggest; but me, I say you settle the question forever. Now you go on home!"

"Nobody hain't axed you fo' none o' yore edvice," growled her son.

"By gyar," Granny Wolfe reorted witheringly, "you need edvice, as shore as the Old Scratch hain't a jaybird."

Colonel Mason turned to his waiting horse, and swung himself into the saddle with the agility of a cavalryman. Tot seemed only half-conscious, only half-alive, and it was with some difficulty that the colonel and Granny Wolfe lifted her to the saddlefront. The grizzled mountaineer stood and watched it with a face like a mask of stone.

Then the horseman left the old hillwoman berating her son mercilessly, and rode toward the basin's bottom.

"Now, little lady," he said when they had come to level ground, "I'll take you to your mother in short order. I'm afraid to try to take you to Johnsville; it would probably be too much for you. It'll be all right for you to go home. Your father is sorry he was so hasty with you."

Tot stared wide-eyed into his patrician old face. Her spirit fluttered up quickly.

"I want to go back to Mis' Mason," she told him.

"Oh!" smiled the colonel. "Back to Mrs. Mason, eh? Very well. Perhaps it would really be better. You may need the services of a doctor, and you couldn't get one out here—though I'd never dare to tell Granny Wolfe that! And I fancy, little lady," he added pleasantly, "that Mrs.

Mason will be right glad to have you back."

They soon met young Wolfe, who had just ridden through Devil's Gate. He heard the story as they rode toward Johnsville, and made no comment, though there was a glint in his eyes that his foster-father hadn't been accustomed to seeing there.



Mrs. Mason saw them coming, and called the doctor by phone. Then she ran to make ready the bed in the blue-and-white room upstairs.

It was a case of utter physical exhaustion and high nervous strain, the doctor said; there was some fever now, and would doubtless be more before morning. Tot watched him as though she were not the least interested. After an hour, Doctor Rice left medicine and directions for giving them, and turned homeward.

Another hour went by. The patient spoke to the anxious-faced little woman who sat at her bedside.

"That tombstone. I can see it as plain as daylight. Ef I look somewhar else, it moves whar I look. 'Hear lays Little Buck Wolfe.' Are you shore he ain't dead, Mis' Mason, plum' shore?"

"Very sure," promptly. "He's perfectly safe."

"Ef you don't keer, Mis' Mason," and Tot strove to lift herself to an elbow, "I'll jest step downsta'rs and see."

"Delirium," the colonel's wife whispered to herself. Aloud, "No, you mustn't get up! Wait, dear; I'll call him."

Wolfe entered the blue-and-white bedroom a minute later. He went to the bedside and knelt there, took one of the hot and fluttering hands and caressed it awkwardly.

"I'm all right," he told her over and over. "Don't you see? Everything is all right."

She appeared to be satisfied, and accepted a teaspoonful of queer-tasting liquid without a murmur.

But the fever kept going higher in spite of the queer-tasting liquid, and the doctor was summoned again. He gave a powder, left others, and departed. Out in the hallway, Wolfe paced the floor anxiously. On the veranda the colonel sat smoking and swearing under his breath at the forces that had brought themselves together in a mighty attempt to crush him that was as flesh and blood of his own.

Wolfe stopped his nervous pacing at the sound of soft footfalls behind him, turned, and faced his foster-mother.

"I don't think you need worry yourself like this, Arnold; the case isn't so desperate," said Mrs. Mason, half-whispering. She went on smilingly, "If you hadn't told me about Alice, I'd think you were about to fall in love with Tot—or that you'd already fallen in love with her! She's handsome, honey boy, isn't she?"

"Very," he agreed, "but I'm not in love with her, mother."

Mrs. Mason gave him a wise look. "Of course, you aren't, not yet. It's gratitude and appreciation, now. But a man of your make-up could hardly help caring for a girl like Tot—after she has had a little polish, you know. That was a boyish affair you had with Alice, a sort of flashlight affair; you hadn't been much used to women, and she dazzled you. You'll see the day, dear boy, when you'll be quite thankful that Alice wouldn't have you. Now go straight off to bed, Arnold!"

"You'll call me if she gets worse?"

The colonel's wife promised. Wolfe went to his room. He shook his head and smiled bitterly at that which Mrs. Mason had said concerning "a flashlight affair." He thought she didn't understand.

But she did.

AT NOON of the next day, Sheriff Alvin Starnes, tall and lank, brave and illiterate, rose from his office chair and went to a telephone instrument on the wall. He asked for Colonel Mason's residence.

"This is Sheriff Starnes," he growled into the transmitter. "Is the young lady still improvin'?"

"Doing finely, thank you, Sheriff." It was Little Buck Wolfe talking. "The colonel told you about her, eh?"

"This mornin', sir. I think I'd better go after Mayfield, Mr. Mason. I ain't forgot that I promised to let you run that end o' the county, on account o' your kin-folks; but Mayfield ain't your kin-folks."

"Go ahead!" laughed Wolfe. "Hope you catch him."

"Startin' right now," replied Starnes. "Goo'-by!"

He hung up the receiver, rang off, crossed the room and took his broad-brimmed black hat from a nail that had been half driven up in the corner of a board lettered boldly: NO SWARING ALOUD. He buckled on a revolver-laden cartridge-belt, and

took a pair of buckskin riding gloves from a drawer of his desk.

Just then there came a slow, heavy rapping at the door, the rapping of a rifle's butt.

The sheriff's lean face showed signs of annoyance. He went to the door. Two



men stood a few feet from the steps. One of them was loosely-built, angular, and bullet-headed; the other was a big, square-chested man with sun-burned black hair and beard. Only the big man was armed.

"You're the high sheriff o' this here county; hey?" said Alex Singleton.

"I am, sir."

"Then you arrest this here rattlesnake—take him off o' my hands afore I lose what little holt I've got on myself and put out his blasted light!" old Singleton roared. His voice was hoarse, rasping, like the sound a dull file makes when drawn across a thin steel edge. "He tried his best to kill a man I call my friend, Little Buck Wolfe; and the damned yaller dawg"—he was blind with rage, choking full—"he struck the one and only gyurl I've got—"

"And arrest him, too," Mayfield broke in desperately—"arrest him, too, fo'—"

"Shet yore mouth!" cried Singleton. His eyes blazed gloriously now, and his voice held a note of triumph. He wheeled and faced Sheriff Alvin Starnes again.

"And arrest me," he said, "fo' a-killin' Mort Gibson in a cyard game, over on Shelton Laurel, five year ago come eight o'clock o' the night o' next September the thirteenth!"

Alex Singleton, winner as well as loser, passed the officer his rifle and a revolver, and held out his wrists for manacles.

X

IT WAS the third of August, and one of the warmest days of the summer. The extremely dry weather had withered all small vegetation; even the leaves of the laurel, that evergreen chaplet of the

hills, were curled into little tubes and drooping. The majestic bald peak called Picketts Dome shimmered in the pale blue heat-haze. The ragged fringe of jack-pines on the uneven, rockboun crest of the Big Blackfern stood motionless for lack of a breeze, seeming much like soldiers turned to stone in a battle-line that had previously suffered from the galling fire of some invincible enemy.

Grandpap Singleton, the Prophet, mopped his old brow frequently with a faded bandana as he followed the Devil's Gate trail, going northward. He walked with a dogwood cane, his other hand resting on his rheumatic left hip; but in spite of his decrepitude there was about his movements an eagerness that suggested an objective point of no little importance.

When he was barely through the Gate, he came upon old Granny Wolfe, who was kneeling beside the trail and trying to tie the ends of a 'coonhide shoestring that was somewhat too short.

Before she knew that he was anywhere near her, he leaned over, touched her lightly on the shoulder, and cried out like some mischievous boy, "Boa!"

The old hillwoman, startled, went stiffly to her feet.

"Well, I wisht I may never! My sakes, Grandpap Bill Singleton, you skeered me mighty durned nigh it to death! Now what'n Tophet do ye mean, anyhow, a-slippin' up on folks that a-way?" She tried to appear very angry, and failed altogether.

"Huh-huh!" laughed Grandpap Singleton, tugging at his long white beard. "How's yore old bones this mornin', Jane Wolfe?"

Granny Wolfe smiled the smile she had been holding in with difficulty for half a minute.

"Bill Singleton," she said, bending toward him, "ef it wasn't fo' the dad-burned old rheumatiz, I'd feel like a yearlin' colt! I've been a-totin' a buckeye-nut in my pocket, but it never done me a hoot's wo'th o' good. 'Bout the onliest thing 'at ever helped me any was good luck, lamp-ile, and tar-pentine. Ever try it, Bill, honey?"

Some thirty feet back in the laurel, a huge and gaunt man whose black hair and beard were not without threads of silver, knelt before a ginseng plant. He had been listening, and he had heard every word of the little conversation that had just passed between his mother and the father of his bitterest enemy. Once he

had whispered to himself, "Well, I'll be danged!"

"I've tried everything, Jane," nodded Grandpap Singleton. "Well, I'm a-goin' down to the upper end o' Little Buck's railroad to see Little Buck, Jane. My pore son Alex his trial was to take place over in



town yeste'day, and Little Buck he'll shore know about it, o' course. I shorely am a-hopin' they've done went and turned Alex loose; and yit—and yit, Jane, he ain't never come back home!"

"And when is Cat-Eye Mayfield to have his trial?" Granny Wolfe wanted to know.

"Done had it," the Prophet answered. "He got a-lackin' one day of a year in jail, at hard labor. May I ax whar you'd started to, Jane Wolfe?"

"Me? Oh, I'd jest started down to gass wi' Little Buck fo' awhile, Bill. My shoe it got ontied, and I was a-tryin' to fix it up when here comes you to skeer me mighty nigh to death. I've allus heerd, Bill Singleton, 'at when anybody's shoe it got untied it was a shore sign 'at somebody was a-thinkin' about 'em. Hain't you?"

The aged hillman nodded. Then he went to his knees before her, drew up the ends of the 'coonhide lace, and tied them securely.

"I reckon ye ain't no objections ef we walk down thar together, ha' ye Jane?" he asked as he straightened.

"Shorely I hain't, Bill," with a twinkle in her old eyes. "Jest so's ye don't try to flirt wi' me like ye used to do! When me and you was young and frolicsome, a-livin' with our folks back in the Balsam Cone section, Bill, ye know; hey? Do ye rickollect, Bill Singleton, that 'ar night when me and you was a-goin' home from Mariar Spinnett's weddin' dance, and you slipped one o' yore arms around my waist?"

"Heh?" The old man almost jumped. "O' course I rickollect it, Jane. Perish me ef you didn't slap my jaw so hard I couldn't taste nothin' but red pepper fo' two weeks!"

Then his lined countenance became very sober. "And may I ax ye now, Jane, after so many years is gone sence, why it was

you married Sackett Wolfe 'stid o' me? I allus felt like I wanted to know, Jane."

"Well, I'll be danged!" Old Buck Wolfe muttered into his beard.

"Well," Granny Wolfe creaked, "I thought ye begun to boss me too soon, Bill. But don't misunderstand me; I hain't no regrets about a-marryin' who I did, though the day I tied up to Sack I reckon I loved you the best."

Back in the laurel, Old Buck Wolfe sank down on his heels, the ginseng root entirely forgotten. Grandpap Singleton took off his hat and shook his snowy head sadly.

"And so come on, Bill, honey," smiled Granny Wolfe, "and le's me and you go down to see Little Buck; hey?"

Together, side by side, they limped down the narrow trail, each of them wondering what the difference would have been if they had married each other in the wild and glorious morning of their lives. Old Buck Wolfe crept from the thick underbrush and followed them stealthily, for he, too, wished to know the outcome of Alex Singleton's trial.

The bed of the toy railroad had forged its way, like the path of some monstrous serpent, to a point easily within three miles of Devil's Gate. The geared locomotive had been put into service, and the laying of light steel rails was progressing rapidly. Already the sawmill and logging machinery had been unloaded from the new siding that the C. C. & O. had put in for the Unaka Lumber Company.

The aged couple found the company's general manager talking with his foreman under a great yellow poplar that was to be cut to make way for the road's bed. Wolfe dismissed Weaver, and turned to shake hands very cordially with his visitors.

"What about the trial o' pore Alex, my son?" Grandpap Singleton asked forthwith.

Wolfe had been expecting inquiry of this nature. He had his answer cut and dried, as the saying is.

"Alex will be back pretty soon—" and Old Buck the eavesdropper clenched his fists—"accord- ing to what Tot says about it. The trial was postponed, and now they'll have to



bring Cat-Eye from jail to testify. Alex will stick to a straight story, and claim self-defence. Mayfield will be the only witness the State will have, and we think Alex will be cleared altogether.

"I hope the devil gits Cat-Eye Mayfield afore night!" cried Granny Wolfe. "The rawzum-chawin' pup—his durned eyes al-lus 'minded me of a spread-head snake's in dawg days!"

"And how's Tot a-comin' along in town?" asked Grandpap Singleton.

"She's .doing remarkably well under Mrs. Mason's teaching," Wolfe told them. "You'd hardly know her, already! She's studying grammar almost day and night, and she wears her clothes like a lady."

"And when," inquired the garrulous grandmother, "is you and her a-goin' to marry, Little Buck?"

Wolfe gave the old woman an odd look. "Never, perhaps."

"Well, now, that 'ar beats the Old Scratch." Granny Wolfe's face was troubled. "Shorely, honey, you hain't never axed her!"

Old Buck pressed forward a little in the concealing laurel that he might not fail to catch the rest of it.

"No," said his son, "I haven't asked her. And I probably won't, because she wouldn't accept me if I did. I learned that much, anyway!"

Old Buck clicked his teeth. "Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered into his beard.

XI

IT WAS the first of October, which in the mountains means clear and frosty nights and days like rare old wine. The pointed shadow of bald Picketts Dome was reaching for the jagged summit of the Big Blackfern; it was, therefore, almost four o'clock. Granny Wolfe sat huddled low in the doorway on the sunny side of her old cabin; she was trying hard for a nap. Her little black dog Wag lay at her feet, now and then snapping at a bothersome fly.

The old hillwoman was in an irritable mood. She had slept almost none the night before, which had been occasioned by her worrying over the day when the little railroad would reach Devil's Gate, the basin's mouth; she feared, and with good reason, that blood would be shed then. Her son Buck was harder than ever, more grim, more silent, more terrible than ever.

"Wag, drot ye," she said indistinctly, "ye'll gi' me fleas, ye little devil."

There came then a long drawn, lonesome

sound from somewhere near the foot of Big Blackfern Mountain. It is no common thing to hear the mournful cry of a whip-poor-will in the daytime. Granny Wolfe rubbed her aching eyes and looked up in sudden anxious interest. Less than a week had passed since Sarah Wolfe had told her that Preacher Longley Thrash's wife's sister had said that her husband's uncle had said that the cry of a whip-poor-will when the sun was shining meant a death within three days unless the bird was killed promptly.

Granny Wolfe rose with a rheumatic groan, took down from its wooden hooks over the doorway an old, old rifle that her departed husband had loved next to her, and went toward the foot of the Big Blackfern.

"I'll git ye!" she mumbled to herself. "I'll git ye, drot ye!"

It came again when she had gone a hundred yards: "*Whip-poor-will!*"

"Plague on yore pickcher of ye!" she muttered, quickening her step so much that her little dog was forced to trot in order to keep up with her heels. "Ye imp o' Satan, ef I don't shoot a hole through ye wi' this here old rifle o' Sack's big enough fo' a bay hoss to jump through, I hope I may sink! Consarn ye to thunder! I hain't a-havin' enough bad luck, I reckon," bitterly, "and so you had to happen along."

Shortly afterward, she drew back the hammer of the old rifle and limped into the border of laurel. Something moved slightly on a log a few rods up the mountainside, and she saw it. She rested the long barrel in the fork of a sapling, and began to try for an aim, when a cracked old voice came down to her.

"Don't ye shoot me, Jane Wolfe!" half laughing, half afraid. "Heh! Don't ye shoot me, Jane Wolfe!"

"Ef it hain't Grandpap Bill Singleton, the Prophet!" Granny Wolfe cried, greatly relieved. "Why, Bill, 'at's jest the way you used to call me down to the big beech on the creek when you and me was both young and frolicsome, ain't it? My pap he didn't like it fo' you to come to see me, ye'll rickollect! Now I might ha' knowed, dang the luck, what it was when I fust heard it!"

She went on soberly, "Now what'n the name o' goodness do ye want to see me about, Bill? You shorely hain't a-courtin'!"

"Heh! No, not a-courtin'," he said.

He moved slowly toward her, and she

noted that he carried a worn leather-backed Bible under one arm.

"Yes," he told her, "it was me a-whistlin' like a whip-pore-will fo' you, Jane. I didn't much like the idee o' goin' down thar in the enemy's country to see ye, Jane. I wanted to have a talk wi' ye. About the lumber track. Jane, Little Buck he told me 'at the track it would shorely git to the basin tomorrow!"



Because Granny Wolfe had known that already, she expressed no surprise. She leaned the rifle against a tree, and rested her hands on her thin old hips.

"I'm a-listenin', Bill," she reminded him. "You ain't done a-talkin'."

"I wondered, Jane," thoughtfully, "ef the' was anything on earth you and me could do to stop the bloodshed afore it comes."

"The' hain't!" Granny Wolfe exclaimed. "Bill Singleton, the's a-goin' to be trouble sech as even me and you never seed afore. My son Buck he has done passed his word 'at the railroad shain't never come into the basin; Little Buck, bless his heart of him, has passed his word and promise 'at it shall—and they're both Wolfes. Little Buck he's got to put the thing through or die a-tryin', ef he's a-goin' to be hon'orable to them 'at sold all o' their property to back him up. He cain't call the law in to help him, acase that would—you know, Bill, jest what it would mean. May the Lord ha' mussy on us all, Bill Singleton! I jest don't know what to do! I've done wore mighty nigh it all the hide off my pore old screakin' knees a-prayin' fo' peace. I've talked to my son Buck ontel I was as black in the face as my dawg.

"And I've tried to pe'suade the rest o' the Wolfes to foller Little Buck 'stid o' Old Buck," she went on gloomily. "But they won't do it. They're like sheep a-follerin' a bell-sheep. All but Nathan, that is. Nath he's allus loved Little Buck, somehow. And Nath he tried to talk his pap into a-seein' the crookedness o' his ways, but it never done no good at all.

Lord ha' mussy on us all, Bill Singleton!"

"What did Old Buck say to Nath?" the Prophet wanted to know, one palsied hand burying itself in his patriarchal white beard.

"He never said nothin' to him," was the answer. "He hit him in the mouth wi' his fist. Pore Nath! Bill, I was jest so sorry fo' Nath, and so durned mad at Buck, 'at I could jest—I could jest ha' died right thar in my tracks."

"Well," Grandpap Singleton said hopefully, "mebbe it'll all come out right in the end. Le's me and you both go to Old Buck and talk to him; heh? Both o' us together, Jane. It may not do no good; but ontel we've done it we hain't done all we could do, Jane. What do ye say; heh?"

"All right," Granny Wolfe nodded. "He's out the mountain thar a-makin' a run on his moonshine 'still. He'll be mad when he sees us together, mebbe; but ef you don't keer, I shorely don't. Bill Singleton, hain't it a dad-burned shame fo' a man as good as him to be as lowdown mean as he is?"

"Yes, Jane, yes. Ha' ye got a weensy teensy bit o' pipe tobacker about ye, Jane? I fo'got to bring mine along, and I'm jest a-sufferin' fo' a smoke."

"I ain't never without it, Bill, shorely," the old woman told him. "I plants my tobacker afore I plants my bread cawn. We hain't got no fire to light our pipes with, though."

"Good excuse fo' a-goin' out to Buck's still," said Grandpap Singleton. He fished a blackened clay pipe from a trousers pocket. "The tobacker, Jane."

She took a dry twist of home-grown tobacco from a pocket in her faded calico dress, and passed it to him. He courteously filled her pipe first. Then they went limping out the side of the Big Blackfern, these two, over ground carpeted softly with leaves of brilliant saffron, pale yellow, mottled scarlet, deep red, and several shades of brown. Neither spoke, for each was saddened by a keen realization that it was autumn for them in more ways than one.

After fifteen minutes of traveling thus, they entered a narrow and deep, dark gash filled with hemlocks and laurel, through which flowed a very small, clear stream of water.

"Why, the still it hain't far from the fambly buryin'-ground, is it, Jane?" observed Grandpap Singleton as they stepped

into a path that wound its way dimly through the undergrowth.

"Which is jest as it should be, Bill, honey," returned Granny Wolfe, her voice heavy with meaning.

"Heh! Yes, Jane," her companion agreed.

Old Buck Wolfe was in no good humor that afternoon. For one thing, he had been absent-mindedly allowed a "run" to boil over, and the whisky tasted like pickled



beets. The decrepit pair found him on his knees before the crude little stone-walled furnace; he was lustily blowing the fire to make it catch to fresh wood. Another run was on.

Grandpap Singleton walked up silently, to all appearances unaware that he was on forbidden

land. He bent stiffly over and scooped a live coal into the bowl of his pipe. A few puffs lighted the tobacco for him, and he passed the coal to the pipe of the old woman. Then he very calmly seated himself on a downward-turned mash tub.

"Buck," he said seriously to the moonshiner, who had been eyeing him hard, "whar are ye a-goin' to when ye die?"

"I am a-goin' to a place," very readily, "which is knowed as a three-by-seven, a grave, a hole in the ground, a last restin' place, and a last ditch, whar I'll rot down to plain dirt."

He sat back on his heels, and stared at Grandpap Singleton in open defiance.

"Oh, no, Buck," and the aged mountaineer shook his snowy-white head emphatically. "You hain't a-goin' to stop thar. No, sirree. Ef you hain't quick to blaze a new trail, Buck, you're a-goin' as straight to Hell as a honey-bee to its comb."

"How do you know?" snapped Old Buck Wolfe.

The Prophet took his worn Bible from under his arm, put it flat on his outstretched left hand, and touched it with a shaking forefinger as each word was formed on his lips.

"I knows it by the Word o' God, sir."

After a silent moment, he continued. "Buck Wolfe, in some ways you're a most pow'ful smart man."

"I'm smart enough," the moonshiner replied, "not to be ketched a-believin' in things I can't see, anyhow."

"And so you hain't a-believin' the's anything in the nachur of a hereafter, Buck?"

"Nor no Heaven, nor no Hell," the leader of the Wolfe clan snarled—"nor no God."

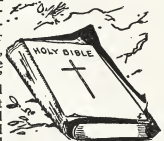
His mother began to wring her hands. "Buck, honey, it skeers me to hear you talk that a-way," she moaned. She sat down on the leaves, took the red bandana from her white head, and wiped nervously at her eyes.

"My friend," said Grandpap Singleton, his voice ready to break, "you shorely are mistaken. Didn't ye ever look at the stars at night, and think about the beginnin' of 'em, and the endin' of 'em? Didn't ye ever think 'at they was allus new, as old as they are—heh? Who else but a God A'mighty could ha' made them stars—and the sun, and the moon, and the earth?"

"And about the res'rection, Buck. Take mighty nigh it the least thing in the world, a mustard-seed. You put it in the ground, and it rots back to dust jest the same as the human body does; and it comes up in the spring, and without any o' the rot or the blackness—but, to save yore life, Buck Wolfe, you can't cut a mustard-seed open and find out *what makes it grow!* I tell ye, the mortal soul has its June as well as the mustard-seed. Buck, any man wi' even hoss sense in his head can argy hisself out of a God ef he only tries. And to them as thinks the' ain't no God, the' ain't none, so far as they're concerned."

And after a long, still minute: "Here's another proof, Buck. The' never was a nation on earth but what wu-shipped something, whether it was a image, the sun, or the true and livin' Almighty; and ef that hain't the c'lestial spark handed on down from old Grandpap Adam, what is it; heh?"

"Fear!" cried Old Buck Wolfe, jutting out his great, bearded jaw. "Most o'



good people is good acause they're afeard not to be, and fo' no other reason. Take yore own case, Grandpap Singleton. It hain't been so many years sence you was counted one o' the wickedest, fightin'est men in the country—'Cracker' Singleton, they called ye then. You never made a change ontel you seed 'at yore best days was done past. You jumped at the hope o' life everlastin' beyant the grave only atter the confidence you had in yoreself was gone. Deny that, ef ye can!"

Old Singleton's countenance became infinitely sad. "I cain't deny it," he muttered brokenly. "I did put it off ontel I'd done turned the crest o' life's journey. And it's acause I put it off fo' so long 'at I'm a-doin' all I can now to build me a pore little shelter in the skies afore I'm called on to go."

"Humph!" Old Buck Wolfe rose too. "Ef the' is sech a Bein' as you think the' is, Grandpap Singleton, the's a-goin' to be some o' the woolpullin'est times on the Day o' Judgment ever you seed. I'd shore ruther take my chances as I'm a-takin' 'em; not as a damned coward, but as a onbeliever acause I hain't never had nothin' proved to me. Well, I've got a run o' yaller-cawn lickter to take keer of, and I tharfore hain't got no more time to fool away wi' you. Tomorrow's a-goin' to be a busy day here in the basin, as shorely as you're knee-high to a tomtit. You better shell out fo' home, is my guess."

"One more minute," begged Grandpap Singleton. "You shorely hain't a-goin' to give Little Buck any trouble in his lumber business, heh?"

"He hain't got no lumber business," flatly.

"I mean this here little railroad and the sawmill——"

"Hain't I done said 'at they shain't come?" sourly. "You've knowed me long enough to know I keeps my word, hain't ye? And hain't I done told ye I've got a run o' lickter to take keer of? You take my edvice, old man, and shell out fo' home."

Grandpap Singleton realized that his mission had failed utterly. The disappointment was so great that it threw his feeble mind into one of its temporary breaks. He knelt and lifted his hands, with the Good Book clasped between them, and began to mutter unintelligibly. Old Buck Wolfe, in a sudden rage, struck down the palsied hands, and sent the Bible flying to the leaves; then he seemed sorry. He lifted old Singleton to his feet, and

pointed toward the southern end of the basin.

"Go on home," he said.

The Prophet found his Bible and went off slowly, his shoulders drooping, his head bent low. The moonshiner turned to his mother, expecting another lashing from her sharp old tongue.

"Begin!" he commanded.

She said in tones so low that he barely heard, "My son, you'd ort to take off yore boots, acause you're a-standin' on ground that pore old man's knees made holy."

Before he thought, Old Buck looked downward. He bent over, his eyes suddenly wide, his jaw hanging, and caught his breath quickly. Cut there in the tightly packed earth was the sign of the cross, about seven inches by five!

"Who done that?" he roared, straightening like a jack-in-a-box.

"What? Oh!" frightenedly. His mother, too, had seen the sign. "It's a warnin', Buck, honey—a warnin' to you!"

She wrung her hands. Her son looked about him queerly. Cut in the bark of a



nearby tree was the cross again, seven inches by five. And he remembered distinctly that Grandpap Singleton had placed one hand on that tree to steady himself as he went.

"Who done that?" he roared again. "You, mother, you done it. Old Bill Singleton couldn't ha' done it without me a-seein' him. I'd ha' seed him, I tell ye!"

"I didn't, Buck," came promptly. Granny Wolfe was quivering with a fear that was certainly genuine. "It's a warnin' to you—Buck, it's the crook o' His finger!"

Old Buck swore roundly. He caught up an ax and chopped away the sign of the cross that had been cut in the bark of the tree. With his boot-heels he quickly ef-faced that which had been cut in the ground. Then he knelt before his false god, the moonshine still.

A voice cried out from the laurel, the voice of the Prophet. It seemed to hang in the air, like smoke—smoke of burning incense.

"'He came unto his own, and his own received him not.'"

XII

DAWN of that memorable day at Devil's Gate found the general manager of the Unaka Lumber Company dressed and standing in the opening of the tent he shared with Weaver. The foreman, too, was awake; he sat on a box inside, busily lacing his boots. Wolfe hadn't slept well because of that which bore so heavily upon his mind; he was quite nervous, which was exceedingly unusual for him; strive as he would, he could not rid himself of the feeling that disaster was very near.

After a few minutes spent in absent-mindedly watching the antics of a playful squirrel on the side of a nearby hickory, he turned to Weaver. Weaver was fully acquainted with the circumstances; Wolfe had found him extremely solid, and he had confided in him unreservedly. The two had grown to like each other well in the few months they had spent in working together.

"You're sure," Wolfe asked, "that we've got enough ties cut and piled at the Gate to reach to the millsite?"

"There's four thousand in that pile, sir," said the foreman.

"It ought to be enough. I'm going down to the engine, Weaver, to see if Tom's got her fired up. Wake the camp, and let's get out as early as we can."

The foreman went out, put his cupped hands to his mouth and shouted an echoing, "Coo-ee!" In response to it, the tents of the negroes became instantly alive, and laughter and joking began to fill the morning air. There came from the cook's canvas domain the rattling of cast-iron. Soon the laborers were kneeling beside the sparkling creek with soap and towels. Not long afterward, many nostrils were sniffing hungrily at the mingled odors of frying bacon and steaming coffee.

Wolfe found his geared locomotive already lifting at its safety-valve spring. He passed the negro engine-man a word of praise, and returned to the camp by an indirect route, trying to engage his worried mind with the autumnal splendor of the woods as he went.

Breakfast was eaten as heartily as though no one expected anything out of the ordinary that day—and no one did, except for Weaver and Wolfe; the laborers had sensed nothing of the barrier that awaited the little railroad at the basin's mouth.

Less than an hour later, the slow but

powerful locomotive drew its string of lumber flats to a halt at a point near where the rails ended; it was a short distance below the Gate. The crew sprang to the ground, each man of it with a pick or a shovel, a spike-driving hammer or a crowbar, an ax or a saw. The work began forthwith.

Wolfe and his foreman walked ahead to the lower edge of the Gate, entrance to the forbidden land. They stopped near a slender young poplar that had been felled squarely across the trail during the night just gone; it reached from one side of the pass to the other, and it was strong testimony to the nice calculation of the person who had cut it. Weaver looked puzzled, then he faced Wolfe.

"Who did this?"

"This," Wolfe answered correctly, turning to his companion, "is the deadline."

"You mean your father——?"

"Nothing else," Wolfe picked up a leaf of transparent yellow, and began to tear it to pieces without even seeing it.

Weaver suddenly wheeled and looked off down the creek. "I wonder what's wrong back there?" he grumbled. "The boys have quit singing, and they don't do that when everything is moving along smoothly. Suppose we see if anything's happened; eh?"

He retraced his steps of a few minutes before, with Wolfe following at his heels. They found the crew, even to the engineer, standing grouped under a crooked water-oak; all their jaws were sagging, and all their eyes were staring upward.

Suspended by a white cord, some twenty feet from the ground, was a foot-square piece of cardboard which bore in pencil this crudely-printed warning:

BLACK MAN DON'T
LET THE SUN GO
DOWN ON YE HEAR

"Say, Boss Weaver, suh," inquired a dozen uneasy voices at once, "what do that mean, suh?"

Weaver did not answer the question. He looked toward Wolfe. It was Wolfe's place to answer. But there was only silence.

The driver of the locomotive approached the foreman then. "What them mountain people gwine do to us black men effen the sun go down on us heah, Boss Weaver, suh?" he asked frightenedly.

Before Weaver could utter the "I don't know" that was on his tongue, there came from a point a few rods above in the laurel the keen report of a rifle. The white



cord parted, and the piece of lettered cardboard fluttered to the ground. It was a forceful answer to the negro engineer's question.

"Good marksman, all right," Weaver observed.

"Stay right here until I come back, boys," ordered Wolfe.

He hurried up the rugged steep, searched the laurel and the rocks, and saw no sign of any one. He climbed to the top of a huge boulder, and looked in all directions from that point of vantage. Then he saw a huge, gaunt man with a rifle under his arm step from the underbrush below and walk rapidly toward the settlement of the Wolfes. It was his iron-hearted father.

"I thought so," he muttered.

He went back to Weaver and the negroes.

"I'll answer for your safety, boys, until the middle of the afternoon," he told the crew. It would require that long, he figured, to build the railroad to the deadline. "You know very well that you can trust me to keep my promises. Double pay from now on. Go to it."

The laborers resumed their work, but not very willingly. There was a spirit of certain danger in the air they breathed.

A few minutes later, Wolfe faced this pointed inquiry from his foreman: "Well, sir, have you any plans as to what we're going to do after the middle of the afternoon?"

"I must admit, Weaver," promptly, "that I haven't."

He thought, then, of something he had once said to Colonel Mason: "When I get to the barrier, I'll go over it, or under it, or around it, or through it."

The little speech had seemed dramatic enough at the moment of its utterance. Now it seemed tragic and pitiful.

"See here," said Weaver, gripping

Wolfe's arm firmly, "there's only one way out for you. I'll not deny that it's a hard way; it will cripple or kill your first purpose, the—er, elevating of your people; but there's no alternative. The law, I mean; that's your one way out. When you cross the deadline with the track, your dad and his men will be up there on the Big Blackfern's side of the Gate with rifles in their hands—all but your brother Nathan—and the devil will be to pay. After that, you won't be able to keep the law out; don't you see, sir?"

"The law—"

"Yes," Weaver nodded. He continued, "It wouldn't be hard for Starns and a picked posse to steal upon them from behind while their attention is turned toward your crossing the deadline, and arrest them; it could be done without any trouble, I think. Then they could be kept—er, out of harm's way until they promised to behave themselves. I'm only your foreman, I know, sir. But I don't want to see you fail!"

Wolfe shook his head. "Even granting that the arrest could be made without hurting anybody, it isn't the thing for me to do," he said gloomily. "My people would refuse to work when they were put into jail; they'd be starved to it; it would build up a hatred for me that no length of time could wipe away. It is useless to talk about it, Weaver."

"But there's no other way, sir!" the foreman insisted.

"No other way?" echoed Wolfe. He faced Weaver sternly. "I'll show you. There must be another way. It's up to me to make another way."

The other smiled a rather mirthless smile. "All right," he said. "Go the limit. I'll try to be there with you, if you need me, no matter what or where the limit may be. I'm no quitter, sir."

"I'm very much obliged to you," Wolfe said earnestly, "but—"

He never finished it.

The work went on sluggishly. The negroes were afraid of the men who could so easily cut down a hanging thread with a rifle's bullet. Weaver had learned well the subtle diplomacy necessary to his trade; but, try as he would, he was unable to get those under him to move beyond a certain pace.

Just before noon, Little Buck Wolfe went to see his father. Old Buck sat in his cabin's front doorway; he was moodily whittling at a stick of soft red cedar. The son stopped at the rickety gate, and

leaned lightly against one of the decaying posts.

"Good morning, father," he said brightly.



The big mountain man looked up, saw his namesake, and went to his feet. His face was the face of a savage now. His coal-black eyes glared his unspeakable contempt. Every big, hard muscle in his body seemed to be gathering itself for action. He was a human

tiger.

"What in hell do ye want here?" he demanded in a voice that was as cold and as merciless as death itself.

"I came to ask you for advice," quietly. "I'm very much up against it, as the saying is. If you were in my place, trying to help your people, trying to make good for the sake of those who put up everything they had to back you, trying to win out without recourse to law—I say, if you were in my place, what would you do? You know the circumstances. Please advise me."

The shot failed to tell. It glanced off without leaving the slightest impression as a shot.

"Ef I was in yore place," came readily and sneeringly, "I'd change my name to Singleton—or Dawg—and 'en I'd go out in the woods and spile a good rope by a-hangin' myself with it. That's edactly what I'd do ef I was in yore place."

"That's no answer to my question," the younger Wolfe protested, trying hard to hold his temper in leash and succeeding barely. There were times when education fought almost a losing fight with his hot hill blood, the blood that was not so far removed from the dark wildernesses and their animal skins and clubs with heads of stone, and this was one of those times.

"Yes, it is, too," blared Old Buck Wolfe. "Ef the's anything else ye wants to know, spit 'er out; ef the' hain't, make some quick tracks away from here!"

"One thing more," said the son, with enforced calmness. "Do you actually mean to make murderers and outlaws of your-

selves in the attempt to keep me out of the basin?"

His father took up from beside the doorstep a repeating rifle of heavy caliber. Old Buck held the weapon in his left hand, and with his right forefinger slowly tapped the blued-steel barrel.

"The fust man 'at drives a spike on this side o' the little poplar in the Gate will be shot by me, myself," he declared in a voice that had become hoarse. "Now ye've got my word fo' that, and you know mighty well 'at I keeps my word."

"The first man to drive a spike on this side of the deadline," Little Buck Wolfe replied, "will be me. You know that you could never shoot your own son. Our people never would stand for that. You wouldn't be chief of your 'clan' any longer. You'd be cast out, just as you've cast me out. And if it's necessary, I'll drive all the spikes that remain to be driven."

This was a shot that made an impression. Old Buck had gone ashen behind his beard, and his eyes were wide and staring. But he was not long in a quandary. His rage had drawn him deep into the vortex of primitive passion. The ties of blood were none too sacred now. He advanced a few steps, and shook a great fist at his fifth son.

"Ef you don't believe I'll shoot you fo' a-drivin' the fust spike on this side o' the little poplar, jest try it and see!" he cried. "I'll do it ef I haf to shoot myself wi' the next ca'tridge in my rifle. I'll do it ef I haf to shoot every man Wolfe by name. And ef you think you can send a sheriff's posse out here to take me, try it. The' hain't no sheriff's posse 'at can take me!"

He meant every word of it. He was almost a madman now. It drove young Wolfe into the depths of despair.

"I'm not going to send a sheriff's posse out here," he said broken-heartedly. He had a strangle-hold on his temper now. "I'm not going to resort to law. I'm even forgetting that I'm an officer of the law myself. I think—perhaps—I'd better—I'm going to drive that first spike and let you shoot me. It's the only honorable way out for me. Good-by, and maybe I'll meet you at another Gate after we've met again at the Devil's!"

He turned and walked off blindly.

Blindly, and bitterly. The fates were set against him. The fates were laughing in their sleeves at the failure of his strongest efforts, at the defeat of his best impulses. In his despondency he really believed that it would be best to drive the

spike of destiny, take the bullet from the cruel, never-erring rifle and die, and go out honorably along with the soul of his iron father. Only two need die this way. The work would be carried on by others, the Masons would not lose, and his benighted people would ultimately be led into the paths of light. The result, surely, would be worth the sacrifice.

He found difficulty awaiting him when he reached the workers below the Gate. The negroes had talked matters over among themselves, and they were anxious to be off from the place where danger lurked everywhere. Wolfe went into their midst, and prevailed upon them finally to stay with him for two more hours. The little railroad began to creep toward the deadline once more.

Wolfe seated himself beside the old trail, on a stone the size of a small barrel, and watched the work almost without seeing anything of it. A hand placed lightly on



his shoulder brought him back to himself. He turned his head and saw a tall, slender but very muscular, finely-featured young mountaineer smiling down upon him. Through the newcomer's sharp resemblance to Tot Singleton, Wolfe recog-

nized him as her brother, "Fightin' Lon"—the only brother she had.

"Hello!" said Wolfe. He rose and proffered his hand. Young Singleton took the hand and shook it warmly.

"We've jest had a letter from pap," said Fightin' Lon, in his musical drawl. "Tot she sent it out from town by a hunter. Pap says he had to git a real lawyer to write the letter fo' him, and we had to ax the hunter to read it fo' us. Pap he said 'at he was acquitted on grounds of self defense and 'count of no one believing Cat-Eye Mayfield and 'at he'd be a-comin' home right off, and he said fo' us to light in and he'p you any way we could, Little Buck. So we gathered ourselves together and cut the mustard right down here to he'p you build yore railroad, all of us."

As though he had given a signal, more than a score of stalwart, strapping hillmen emerged from the thick laurel, not one of them armed, and formed a half-circle before Wolfe. The Unaka Lumber Company's general manager shook hands with the last man of them.

"We heerd you a-talkin' to them 'ar darbies, Little Buck," smiled Fightin' Lon. "You needn't to keep 'em a minute longer. We'll lay yore road fo' ye, clean smack-dab to the top o' the Dome ef ye wants it to go thar. And it shain't cost ye a red copper cent!"

Wolfe began to stare at the brown and gold carpet of autumn leaves under his feet. Here was a dilemma, indeed. He didn't dare refuse the assistance of the Singletons, on their own account; on account of his own people, he didn't dare to accept that assistance. He wondered it were possible to make Lon and his kinsmen understand. That appeared to be his only hope.

"Men," he said impressively, "first I want to say that I don't know how to thank you as I'd like to thank you, for this. Remember that. I'm grateful. Now pay close attention to what I'm going to say to you."

He made them an eloquent address there in the mellow autumn sunlight, there amid the sad glory of falling and fallen leaves. He appealed with impassioned words to the good that he knew slumbered in their half-savage breasts. There was little in his heart, indeed, that he did not lay bare to them. But he saw their faces cloud in spite of all that he could say. They could not, or would not, see far enough into the truth to grasp his point of view.

"Let loose o' that 'ar pizenvine-and-honey stuff!" Fightin' Lon finally interrupted. "You're a-wastin' puffed good breath a-doin' it!"

The Singletons had reasoned, of course, that they were bending their pride close to the breaking-point by conferring this great favor. They had debated the question warmly upon receiving the letter from old Alex from Nashville, and the affirmative had carried only because of the stubborn insistence of Lon. Consequently, Lon was now by far the angriest of them all. He drew himself up as straight as an Indian, and, like an Indian, folded his fine sun-browned arms over his ample chest. He held his head high, and looked down along his aquiline nose and to the pale face of Little Buck Wolfe.

"Yore own folks has done cut you off,"

he said, his voice dry and hard and pinched. "They even put up a tombstone wi' yore name on it as a sign 'at you was dead fo'ever so far as they was concerned. I know 'em, Little Buck, and I know 'at you can't never be at peace with 'em. We're mad at this, o' course. We got a danged good right to be mad. We had to fo'git a lot o' things to come down here this a-way, and it hurts to be turned down flat. We come willin' to work the blood o' our hearts out through our hands fo' ye. We come willin' to fight fo' ye ef ye need it!"

He swallowed hard, and continued hotly. "Halfway stuff don't go wi' us at all. I give ye this here: you can either put us to work without any pay, or else we'll take the Lost Trail's side o' the Gate and stop yore railroad afore it gits to the poplar tree deadline! Well," impatiently, "which one is it a-goin' to be?"

"I believe," said Wolfe, "that I told you my people would fire on you the minute you went to work for me. I explained to—"

He stopped trying to talk. It was of no use to talk.

"Didn't I tell ye," almost shouted Lon Singleton, "'at we was willin' to fight fo' ye as well as work? Why, fightin' it's our middle names, dang it to the devil!"

It was here that Weaver the foreman took a hand. He walked angrily up to Singleton.

"Don't you see that you're tormenting him for nothing?" he asked. "He's got the right dope, sure; you're wrong, absolutely. And it won't pay to try sniping at us from the rocks up there, so take my advice and don't. Now take your men away, won't you?"

He was fumbling nervously at the butt of the big revolver he wore at his right hip. The Singletons glanced at each other, winked, turned into the laurel and were gone like so many spirits. Wolfe beckoned to his foreman.

"They'll be back pretty soon, Weaver. If they have to go home to get their rifles, it'll be an hour—but they won't have to go home to get their rifles. We'd better let the men go. Tell them—"

A rifleshot rang out sharply. A bullet struck a negro's shovel, ricocheted, and buried itself deep in a tree with a quick and spiteful *snak!* Another rifle bullet came whining down and splintered the handle of a pick. Still another leaden warning struck a light steel rail that rested on a laborer's shoulder, gave forth a nasty

ting! and dropped, flattened, to the ground. The blacks let out a wild howl of fright,



and broke incontinently for the shelter offered by the four thousand ties. Once there, they looked reproachfully toward Wolfe; he had promised to answer for their safety, and they were certainly not safe now!

Wolfe and Weaver also went to the shelter of the ties. They did

not succeed in convincing even one of the crew that they had not foreseen the immediate thing they were facing.

Before long the Singletons separated, a man to himself, seeking to get at all sides of the refuge the negroes had chosen. They did not mean to shoot to kill; they meant only to shoot to scare. If they stopped the building of the little railroad, that which they considered their injured pride would be healed.

Then they opened fire again with hair-fine aim. But a glancing bullet drew blood from the engineman's forearm—and Wolfe heard bitter words of blame directed toward himself. It put Wolfe at the end of the tether that had been strained so hard. He could have held himself in no longer. The primitive part of him rose above his better self. He snatched his revolver from its holster, and turned upon Weaver almost savagely.

"We're going to fight, my friend," he said calmly but with a dangerous glitter in his eyes. "Their bluff is getting serious—if it's a bluff. A barricade all around us first—at it, boys!"

The ties made it. When it was done, Little Buck Wolfe, bright-eyed, white in the face, straightened behind it and began to look for a Singleton. He wanted to see Fightin' Lon. He had forgotten now that Lon was Tot's only brother; that Tot had loved him nearly all her life; and that Tot had saved him from death at the hands of the murderous Cat-Eye Mayfield—the vise of circumstance had pressed it entirely out of his memory in that moment of crisis.

He caught a glimpse of Fightin' Lon, and he fired six shots at him!

And Fightin' Lon, safe behind a tree, laughed down, "Bah! You couldn't hit the United States, Little Buck, wi' a double-barreled scatter-gun!"

Wolfe growled out one of the few oaths of his responsible years, and began to reload his revolver's cylinder hasfily. A Singleton bullet jumped his hat tantalizingly on his head, but he paid no attention whatever to it. When he began to fire again, the foreman joined in with his own revolver. The air in the barricade became thick with powder-smoke. The echoes of the firing became one continuous roar.

Then one of the hillmen cried out in pain, and following that, the acting-chief of the Singletons shouted in a black rage, "You've got blood now, Little Buck Wolfe! We're a-goin' to shoot to kill from now on!"

Weaver caught the general manager by a shoulder and drew him down and out of danger. Bullets began to fairly pepper the barricade. The real seriousness of their position smote Wolfe like a blow. He wasn't used to this.

"Look up there!" said Weaver, pointing toward the Big Blackfern's jaw of Devil's Gate.

Old Buck Wolfe and his men, all of them armed, stood in plain view up there among the boulders.

"If your people don't help us," Weaver went on, "right here is where we either stick up a white flag, or check out. We can't handle the Singletons; there's too many of them. Let me ask your father for help!"

"No!" Wolfe objected. "No to the white flag, too!"

But Weaver was already shouting lustily to the leader of the Wolfes.

And Old Buck roared back this, "No, sirree! I've done promised I'd never start another fight wi' the Singletons!"

Then a great silence fell over everything. The Singletons were saving ammunition, and waiting patiently for a man inside the puny barricade to show his head. Wolfe knew they wouldn't wait long. He knew they would become impatient, and rush the barricade. He looked around at the groveling negroes. Their lives were in his keeping; he was responsible for their safety. For their sake, he decided that he would humiliate himself in the eyes of both the Singletons and the Wolfes.

He drew from his pocket a white handkerchief, ever the emblem of rank coward-

ice to the mountaineer, and began to knot a corner of it to a sourwood switch.

But it was not necessary that he suffer the humiliation of being looked upon as a coward. A big, square-chested man came running up the track; he bellowed two words that were as magic—"Go home!"

The attacking party turned unhesitatingly to obey!

Wolfe leaped over the barricade to meet the newcomer. Wolfe was altogether himself now. The spirit of civilization was again in the ascendency.

"Alex Singleton, by the grace of God!" he cried dramatically.

XIII

FIVE minutes after the coming of the old chief of the Singletons, the Unaker Lumber Company's general manager was the one man left in the immediate vicinity of the piles of ties. Alex Singleton had driven his kinsmen homeward, telling them in no uncertain language as they went just what he thought of them for the grievous mistake they had made. His brother Eli turned upon him angrily, and so did his son Lon; he quite promptly knocked them both down.

Weaver had been sent with the negro laborers to Johnsville, where he was to do the paying off. The Wolfes had disappeared silently from the eastern side of the Gate.

The one man left on the scene of the recent fight did not ponder the situation for long. He took up an ax

and went to cut the deadline tree twice and remove the piece.

He had not struck half a dozen blows when he saw coming toward him from the basin, as fast as she could possibly walk, his grandmother; the old woman carried her sourwood staff horizontally, and the bowl of her clay pipe was turned carelessly downward. When she saw her grandson alive, she stopped, threw up her hands, and let her pipe fall to the grass at her feet. She appeared to



be unable to believe that he was really safe.

"Little Buck, honey," she called fear-somely, "is 'at shore enough you a-choppin' that 'ar tree the same as ef—as ef ye wasn't hurt none? Or does I see a spe-rit?"

"I'm all right, grandmother," he answered cheerily; then he asked solicitously concerning her rheumatism.

"My rheumatiz? I'd durn nigh' fo'got it." She picked up her pipe, and limped to him. "But I hain't no 'count, honey, at all. I'm skeered ontel I hain't got as much sense as a last year's bird nest. I was shore 'at ye'd been killed by them devilish fools. I dramp' it last night, too. I wisht I may never git another breath ef it don't jest look like the good Lord has fo'got ye, Little Buck, darlin'! But He ain't. He jest got ye in the pot to b'ile ye down to see what the 'is to ye, honey. You stick; you show 'em. Yore pap hain't a-goin' to shoot at ye. Yes, I knows about it. So does the rest o' the Wolfes. They all says 'at he won't shoot at you. Why, he's dang nigh all to pieces!

"Or he was this mornin' early, anyhow," she ran on. "He found a cross cut in his bedroom floor, seven inches by five! And the' hadn't been nobody in the room but him and yore mother, neither; and yore mother she never done it. Now ye needn't to ax me nothin' about it, acause I shore don't know nothin' about it! But it makes me afeared to stay by myself at night, Little Buck; I can tell ye that. Well, what about the shootin'?"

He told her.

"I knowed it was the Singletons, acause most of it was done from the Lost Trail side," she chattered. "Well, Alex he'll hold 'em down fo' ye now. So you jest go right on ahead like ye've been a-goin', and ye're shore to win out, honey."

"I hope to," he said uncertainly, "but I don't see how. I need men, and I can't ask anybody to come in here and risk being sniped. I—I don't know what I'm going to do about it, grandmother."

She cocked her head to one side. "Would Nath he'p any?"

"Yes," quickly. "I'd like to have Nathan. I wonder if he'd dare to come over to me?"

"Little Buck, jest you ax him!" exclaimed the old woman, bringing her staff down on the little poplar with a clatter. "And say, honey, listen; don't call me 'grandmother'. Call me 'grammaw' like ye used to when ye was a weeny teeny boy. Hey?"

"All right, grammaw," without the quiver of an eyelash, "I'll ask Nathan the first chance——"

A man, tall, black-bearded, sad-faced, his mouth still showing signs of the bruise made by an iron-willed father's fist, stepped from the undergrowth and confronted Little Buck Wolfe squarely. There was a repeating rifle in his hand. There was a dimness in his eyes. It was Nathan himself. He shook hands silently with his brother.

The younger of the two men spoke first. "You've just come down from the Lost Trail, Nathan, I see; what were you doing up there with a rifle?"

"I wanted to he'p you out."

"I see," gratefully. "You didn't shoot?"

"I never got thar in time," said Nathan Wolfe. "When old Alex he comes a-run-ning up to you, I was jest a-fixin' to let Fightin' Lon have it atween the eyes; and ef I'd ha' pulled the trigger, they'd shorely ha' been another buryin' in the Lost Trail dirt. Little Buck, I heerd ye a-wonderin' to Granny thar ef I would dare to come over to ye. Yes, I would dare. I'm to ye, wi' pick or shovel, rifle or club, sink or swim, live or die, ef ye reely do want me."

"I really do want you," his brother hastened to assure him. "Well, we'll go to work right now. While you finish cutting this piece out of the deadline tree, I'll go back and throw some ties and rails on the upper lumber flat. We'll try to get the track here by nightfall. The grading is all done this far, you see, and the rest of it is all level ground."

Nathan put his rifle down on the leaves.

"Gi' me that 'ar ax," he grinned; and soon the woodland began to ring as his powerful arms drove the steel blade up to the eye at each blow in the soft yellow wood.

By the coming of darkness, the two perspiration-soaked men had finished the narrow-gauge road to the deadline. Then they sat themselves down before a crackling brushwood fire, and ate heartily a meal of their grandmother's cooking.

They slept beside the fire that night.

Granny Wolfe also furnished them with breakfast on the following morning. When they had eaten, they rose silently, each thinking the same thought, a thought concerned with the driving of a certain very important railroad spike. The shadow of the Big Blackfern was slowly falling from



the crest of the Lost Trail and the base of bald Pickett's Dome. A few birds were singing their good-by songs to the lingering spirit of summer. A few sleek squirrels ran here and there in the trees or on the ground, choosing only the finest of nuts or none at all, now and then shaking their bushy tails saucily.

The old hillwoman was hopeful. She wore her red petticoat wrong side out; she had seen, the evening before, the new moon over her left shoulder and not through brush; she had dreamed of being at a wedding, too, a wedding that had taken place in a big white house that stood in the very center of a wide garden of flowers. All this, of course, could mean nothing but good luck!

"It was you and Tot!" she whispered to Little Buck. "And how her blue eyes was a-shinin'! Blast me ef I cain't see 'em yit, her eyes. Now I keep a-wonderin', honey, how Tot she's a-gittin' along in town? Is she a great, fine lady now, Little Buck? She shorely hain't got to be stuck-uppish, has she; hey?"

"Not a bit," smilingly. "She's getting along well, and learning fast; it's remarkable, they say. She's a fine lady, all right! But she's hardly 'stuck-uppish,' grammaw. No fine lady could possibly be stuck-uppish, you know."

"Well, I wisht—now hain't that the truth! Well, I'm a-botherin' of ye, honey. You and Nath wants to go to work. So go ahead. Yore pap he'll break his word, and 'en the goin' ll be as smooth as ile. He—honey, ef here don't come pore old Grandpap Bill Singleton, the Prophet! How d'ye come on this fine mornin', Bill Singleton?"

The aged mountaineer's lips wore a smile, but there was worry in his eyes. He limped up to the trio.

"Ef ever I've seed a drier summer and fall," he began, "I don't know when it was. Why, what'm I a-talkin' about? I don't keer nothin' about the weather now; what I want to know now, Jane Wolfe, is what has become o' pore little Tot?"

Granny Wolfe straightened. "Hain't she at Johnsville, Bill?"

"She 'cided to come back w' her pap yeste'day," said Grandpap Singleton, "and he hain't seed her—nor none of us has—sence he outrun her when he heerd the shootin'. Alex he's s'arched the woods all down thar below, and mighty nigh it everywhar else, and he never found no sign of her at all. Little Buck, please try to find her!"

"Perhaps she went back to the Masons—though it's not likely that she'd run from a fight that her own people were mixed up in," young Wolfe muttered. "We've a 'phone at the camp. Maybe I'd better go down there and 'phone the Masons."

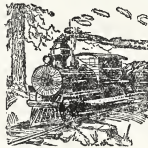
The old mountain man's eyes flitted to the silent locomotive.

"Ef ye go on the ingyne, I'd like to go w' ye," he said. "I hain't never—heh!—rid on no train nor nothin' like it."

"All right," nodded Wolfe. "Want to go with us, grammaw?"

"Shore," eagerly; "I hain't never rid on no train neither."

Wolfe helped the two old people to the cab seats, uncoupled the locomotive, sprang aboard and loosed the brakes. They were off for the now deserted camp.



The Masons hadn't seen Tot Singleton since the morning of the day before! Wolfe frowned

hard at the tidings. After a few minutes spent in talking with the colonel, he hastened back to the locomotive, which was now trembling under a fair head of steam. He delivered his message to Grandpap Singleton, and reached for the throttle-lever.

"Honey," smiled Granny Wolfe, seeming somehow like a guilty child, "ef you won't git mad at me—I know whar Tot is! As we left the aidge o' the basin, I seed her a-peepin' down at us from the laurels on the Lost Trail side! I know I'd orter told ye, honey; but I hadn't never rid on no train afore, and I—I was jest mighty nigh it a-dyin' to ride!"

"That's all right, grammaw," said her grandson. "I wonder why she didn't go to her father's?"

Neither of his hearers could answer the question. He opened the throttle, and a sharp staccato of exhaust shattered the woodland peace.

When he stepped from the cab at a point near the upper end of the track, Nathan met him and said in a series of hoarse whispers, "The's dozens and dozens o' eyes on us right now, Little Buck. Gathered up thar on the Lost Trail is the Singletons, men, wimmen, childern, and dawgs; the Wolfes is the same way on the Blackfern side. I cain't locate pap, which

ain't no good sign, Little Buck. I've been a-thinkin' purty hard sence you left fo' the camp. Pap he's plum wild. He's a-goin' to shoot the man who drives the tust spike, and 'an he's a-goin' to shoot hisself—to keep his word is his religion, and it's his only way out. That's why he's hid out away from the rest of 'em. You don't think he'll do it, hey? None o' the rest of 'em does. But he will! Now, I've b'iled it all down to this here, Little Buck; listen clost—

"Ef you was to have pap and t'others o' the clan arrested and kep' in jail ontel ye could git through wi' buildin' the road and the mill, they'd burn the mill and the timber-woods as shore as shootin' when they got out. Then the law'd come out here wi' big posses, or mebbe the militia, and the'd be a awful fight, and deaths and deaths. So ye can't do that. The one thing left is fo' me to drive the spike, and let pap shoot me and keep his word; that'd turn all o' our people over to you, acause they'd never stand fo' pap a-shootin' his own son. This way, they'd be jest pap and me killed; t'other way, they'd be dozens killed, and more dozens o' pore, daddy-less little childern left to suffer.

"So I'll drive that spike, Little Buck," he smiled. "I hain't a-goin' to let you do it. You're wo'th so much more'n what I am. You can carry on the business, and I couldn't. Asides, I've been a awful mean man in my day, and I want to do this here to sawt o' square things up wi' the Almighty. And so good-by, Little Buck, and good luck to ye as long as ye live!"

He caught up a hammer and a spike, and ran toward the section of loose rails his own hands had placed the proper distance apart just beyond the deadline.

His brother, shaken with emotion, started after him, to catch him and hold him back, to take the hammer and the spike from him and to drive the spike himself; but he tripped and fell, and before he found his feet again Nathan had placed the big iron nail and was raising the hammer to strike it.

"Wait, Nathan!" cried Little Buck Wolfe frantically. "Stop!"

Nathan did not wait. The hammer fell with a force that sent the big iron nail halfway to the heart of the oaken tie. Again the fine, muscular arms lifted the pointed hammer, and again did the hammer fall—then there came from the eastern jaw of Devil's Gate the roaring, murderous sound of a shot.

But Nathan paid no attention to it!

He worked on determinedly. Before the echoes of the report had died completely away, two more spikes had been driven up to the head beyond the deadline. Little Buck Wolfe went to help, and soon the entire section of rails was made fast. A victory was won. For the first time in his life, Old Buck Wolfe had failed to keep his word.

The two brothers straightened then, and looked in all directions. A moment later, they saw Sheriff Alvin Starnes and a posse of men that represented the flower of the county's manhood, step into the Gate trail from the undergrowth; and they held as prisoners Old Buck Wolfe and



nineteen other Wolfes, all of them disarmed and handcuffed!

The general manager of the Unaka Lumber Company went pale. He ran toward the sheriff's party.

"Sheriff Starnes," he protested hotly, "this is my own affair! You must let my people go. I never can do anything with them if you take them to jail, never! I promised my father that—at least, I told him—that I would not resort to law. He can't ever be made to believe that I didn't send for you; he thinks I've lied to him, don't you see? They didn't harm me, or my brother Nathan. The fact that you found them with rifles amounts to little; they're never without rifles. Please let them go!"

"One minute, Mr. Mason!" the illiterate, but brave Sheriff Starnes was somewhat angry. "We didn't arrest these men for nothin'. It was like this. One o' my deputies and me watched your father, while the rest o' the posse watched the other nineteen; your dad was some little distance away from the other nineteen, y'see. When the first spike your brother drove was goin' down, your dad lifted his rifle and said to hisself, and loud enough for me to hear, 'I'll git him in the edge o' the leg, anyhow, and keep my word.' I fired off my revolver as a signal for my men to cover the rest of 'em, and my pardner and me took charge o' your father.

"They've got to stay in jail, sir," he continued sharply, "until they can give a peace bond; and they can't give a peace bond until they promise to not harm you or the business you're managin'. Maybe you don't know it yet, Mr. Mason, but Mr. Whitney Fair is buyin' out all o' the stockholders in this thing but you and the col-

onel, which will give him a controllin' interest—and you know how he stands on sentiment!"

Whitney Fair! Alice's father. It was very bad news, indeed. Wolfe clenched his fists instinctively. Whitney Fair was a—a hog.

"We'll make no sech of a promise to nobody!" stormed the ashen-faced old clan chief.

The nineteen others repeated the declaration grimly, and some of them striped it with oaths.

"If I was to let 'em go," the sheriff went on, his voice now not so hard, "what then? You couldn't finish buildin' your operations, and you couldn't operate your operations even if you had 'em built. Jail's the only cure for this contrary twenty, sir. It'll take some o' the pepper out of 'em, and it won't do the everlastin' harm you think it will, either."

Thereupon Starnes and his posse half led, half dragged, their prisoners toward Johnsville.

Once more young Wolfe found himself in despair. What meddling person had brought the interference of the law? Whitney Fair? Who had told Fair about the crisis? Had it not been for that interference, the day would have been signally won for him. True, Nathan would have been shot in the leg.

But what was a fleshwound to such a victory! For his people would have discountenanced even that slight wounding of Nathan, who had so nobly laid himself on the altar of sacrifice, so much that they would have ceased to look to his father. His people would have come over as Nathan had come over. Thrown down, broken-spirited, his father himself might—possibly—have come over to the right way of thinking.

He didn't blame Starnes for taking the nineteen others also. Starnes could not have taken any one of the clan; he had to take the entire faction or none of it.

Weaver arrived from Johnsville. The moment Wolfe saw his foreman, he did something that was rather unusual for him; he jumped at a conclusion.

"What right had you to send the sheriff out here?" he thundered. "If you would take care of your own affairs, and leave mine to me, no doubt you would——"

The look of intense hurt he saw on the face of his friend stopped his speech abruptly. It was long before he forgot that look.

"They'll pay you what's due you at the office," he went on grimly, and Weaver went off down the track.

S

A slender figure in a blue dress sprang out of the laurels and confronted Wolfe. It was the missing Tot Singleton!

"He didn't do it!" she breathed. "I did it—I did it because I just c-c-couldn't bear the thought o' you being killed. I met Mr. Weaver going to town yesterday, and I made him tell me everything. Then I went for the sheriff and a posse—but I made the sheriff promise he wouldn't act unless it was to prevent bloodshed. Mr. Weaver took all o' the blame to save me. Call him b-back and ask him to excuse—to pardon you!"

Wolfe had been seeing her too often, and he had been too busy, to fully appreciate the vast improvement she had made in her language—even when he wasn't beside himself with anger. He gave her a queer, narrow smile now, then called Weaver back and apologized.

"And will you forgive me, Little Buck?" plaintively whispered Tot, when the foreman had turned away.

The bitter answer of Little Buck Wolfe, who in this black hour was mostly mountaineer, came promptly.

"I don't think I will," he said.

XIV

IT WAS with a growing feeling of contempt for himself that Wolfe watched Tot Singleton go silently and brokenheartedly toward her old home in the south end of the basin. He knew that he had been grossly unkind to her, to say the least. She had done that which she had done only because of her deep interest in his own welfare. She had been his guardian angel, ever ready to make any sacrifice for him, and she had never asked anything of him but—forgiveness.

He grappled with the foolish primitive pride that had more than once come near to being his undoing, and put it down.

"Wait, Tot!" he said.

Instead of waiting, she began to run from him. She, too, had a certain amount of primitive pride.

And he frowned and let her go.

Not long afterward, Alex Singleton appeared with twenty-seven of his kinsmen, among whom was his son. He proffered the services of himself and the twenty-seven strapping hill princes in the work of finishing the railroad. Under the new circumstances, he believed Wolfe would

feel free to accept. Wolfe did accept, with gratitude, and the little lumber track began once more to move onward.

When the mill-site was reached, the Singletons, with old Alex as foreman, went to one of the big coves and began to wage war upon the giant oaks and poplars. A better force of woodsmen never felled



trées.

Wolfe hurried out the necessities for the building of the monster saw-mill as fast as they could be shipped. Following the material, came carpenters, masons, and millwrights. The plant went up with a rapidity that was next to amazing. The first day of November saw all the machinery installed and belted, and a huge pile of perfect logs waiting to be converted into export stock worth above a hundred dollars a thousand feet. Since entering the basin, there had not been a single hitch anywhere.

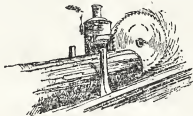
And in October, that month of silences, dying leaves and soft, hazy skies, Wolfe did something besides watch over the building of the saw-mill. On the spot where his father's rambling, rotting, leaky cabin had stood, an extra force of workmen had put up a very comfortable dwelling of six rooms; it was furnished throughout with modern furnishings, and lying on one of the cabinet mantels was a beautiful orange-and-brown violin. The whole was to be a surprise present for the elder Buck Wolfe. After some persuasion from the colonel and his good wife, Sheriff Starnes had agreed to bring the old clan leader out to see it.

The son was counting upon this surprise present to do much toward softening the hard iron of his father's heart. He had drawn his salary for fifteen months in advance, in order that he might build and furnish the house and buy the violin. It had put him to wearing cheap blue shirts and corduroys; he was saving his one presentable suit for special occasions.

The mill was to be started at noon. The Masons and Tot Singleton, Alice Fair—who was still dazzlingly pretty—and her father had come out to see it. Whitney Fair now owned a controlling interest in the company, which was no fault of Colonel Mason's, and he wasn't going to miss

anything. Physically, Fair was a big fellow, corpulent and florid, with an unlikable cleft in his chin and eyes that were a little too small for the rest of his features.

Promptly at twelve o'clock the great whistle blew and awoke ten thousand echoes from the walls of the basin; Progress the Brobdignagian was once more defying the spirits of the wilds. The sawyer threw a log to the carriage by means of a powerful steam apparatus; he thrust his main lever forward, and the foot-wide ribbon of steel dove into the wood with a



scream like that of some victorious medieval warrior. The edgers and trimmers and slashers began to roar intermittently; it was like the quarreling of demons. Fine yellow poplar panel stock began to drift down the transfer chains and to where an inspector stood with a new rule in one hand and a new tally-book in the other.

The Masons and the Fairs shook Wolfe's grimy hands in congratulation. The humming of machinery and the sounds of the saws made speech impossible; but the man who had built the mill understood.

Then Wolfe missed Tot Singleton, and wondered where she had gone. Her absence was, somehow, a fly in this ointment. He left the Masons and the Fairs, and went down the outside stairway to the ground. The Singletons met him in a body. He found himself on old Alex's shoulders, while the rest of them cheered. When he was set on his feet, Granny Wolfe appeared with her staff and her dog; she put her arms proudly around his neck, drew his head down and kissed him on the forehead.

"Granmaw's so happy today, honey," she told him brokenly, "at she could jest drap dead in her consarned old tracks. Kiss grammaw!"

He did, quite affectionately. Old Grandpap Bill Singleton then shook his hand as heartily as his poor strength would permit, and said to him, "Well done! You shorly ain't a slothful servant."

But the fly was still in this ointment of

Wolfe's. Tot had stolen away to keep from meeting him. She was still angry with him, and the thought was oddly annoying!

His footsteps led him, it seemed without the aid of his will, up the creek and to the stately old willow that still towered over its bar of pure white sand. He came upon Tot standing motionless against the body of the gently whispering tree. She met his eager gaze with a pair of blue eyes that were half-curious and half-defiant.

It was Tot that spoke first. "I understood that the mill was to be set in the very center o' the basin. This tree is in the very center o' the basin. Why didn't you put your mill here, Mr. Wolfe?"

He stared at her. Then he took a sort of grip on himself.

"Because I didn't want to—er, desecrate this fine old spot," he told her. "Now please don't call me 'Mr. Wolfe' any more!"

"Oh, Mr. Wolfe," with the very queerest, chilliest little smile, "how many times did you figure out the amount o' lumber you could get from this tree before you mag-nan-i-mously decided to let it stand—Mr. Wolfe?"

He winced. A sharp reply sprang to his lips, but he kept himself from giving it voice.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd rather you wouldn't tease—now."

"Well," and her eyes scintillated peculiarly, "'Little Buck' sounds so much like an outlaw's name, or the name of an ox, you know."

She was strikingly handsome in that moment. A sudden feeling that he was her inferior kept him from being very much exasperated. He looked down at his ragged and greasy corduroys, at his grimy hands, at his worn old boots. He touched the short, stubby beard on his chin with finger and thumb. But he must offer his long-delayed apology.

"I wanted to ask pardon, Tot," said he, "for telling you a month ago that I didn't think I'd forgive you for sending the sheriff out here. I've seen you but twice since that day, and you avoided meeting me both times, or I'd have apologized sooner. Will you pardon me, Tot, and try to forget that I was such a brute?"

The mountain heart within her leaped wildly. What was an apology, the mere uttering of a few courteous words, compared to the nights and nights of poignant suffering his wounding her had brought? She had drawn deeply from self-pity for

solace, without knowing that self-pity is one of the most poisonous weeds in the garden of life. She remembered more keenly than ever now. The wrong was magnified in her intensely human breast. And—she loved him.

Tot Singleton straightened proudly and proudly lifted her head. Deliberately she repeated the words that he had said to her when it was she that begged forgiveness.

"I don't think I will."

"Tot, you can't mean that!"

"But I do mean it," quite calmly.

"Then I'm mighty sorry, little girl."

He faced about slowly and left her, going toward his sawmill.

"I'm lowdown!" she whispered to herself when he had disappeared in the bush. "I made fun o' his name, and how could he help his people if he used any other name? Oh, I'm lowdown— He's such a fine man, and I—I have to watch myself, or I can't even talk proper!"

She turned her face to the body of the old willow that had been a witness to so much in her life, and sobbed because she hated herself for having taken her revenge.

XV

THIRTY days in jail had not made the Wolfe clan into better men.

Contrary to the expectations of Sheriff Starnes, not one whit of the pepper had been taken out of them. They were as grim, as silent, and as bitter on the thirtieth day of their imprisonment as they had been on the first. They had stolidly refused to help in the building of good



roads for the county until a diet of plain bread and water forced them to it; and then they had worked slowly and sullenly, shirking at each and every opportunity. Not a man of them but watched by day and night for some avenue of escape. For escape, to the twenty mountaineers, was the

one and only alternative of rotting in jail. Several times Sheriff Starnes had called

Old Buck to him and said in the kindest possible fashion. "If you'll give me your word that you won't allow your son or the lumber business out there to be harmed, I'll sure raise a peace-bond for you and the others, and let you go home. Promise?"

The stubborn old hillman had not once stooped to give the officer a verbal answer to the question. He had not even shaken his shaggy head. He had said once that he would never make such a promise, and once was enough to say anything.

The jail gang had come in from work on the evening of the day that had seen the starting-up of the big sawmill out in Wolfe's Basin. Much to his surprise, Old Buck found himself alone and unguarded in the little room that served as a lavatory. He peered down the long, narrow corridor that led to the jail's main entrance. There was no person in sight. He had but to make a determined dash for liberty, and liberty would be his. The dusk was thick outside now.

But he didn't make the dash! It was not according to his code of honor to go free himself and leave the other men of his name behind bars. Where one Wolfe went, all the Wolfes must go; when one Wolfe suffered, all the Wolfes must suffer; it was part of the clan's religion. The big hillman threw away his opportunity to escape without the slightest regret.

He drew himself up almost ludicrously straight, walked to the main entrance, and shouted for Alvin Starnes. The sheriff and John Bird, the night jailer, appeared before him.

"What're you doin' out here?" Starnes asked puzzledly.

"Lookin' fo' somebody to lock me up, that's what," growled the mountaineer. With intense scorn, he went on, "You two is a purty pair o' rose-geraniums, hain't ye? Yau ain't fitten to gyard geese, let alone a real man-size man like me. Now smoke that in yore pipe, you tin-can sheriff! Put down yore guns, and I'll thrash ye both."

"I reckon not," smiled the sheriff.

"I reckon not," parroted the jailer.

"Cowards!" retorted Wolfe. "Well," impatiently, "are ye a-goin' to keep me a-standin' here all night? Ef ye hain't a-goin' to tangle up wi' me, stop a-standin' thar a-gawpin' at one another like a pair o' sick hound pups, and le' me into my residence!"

Shortly afterward a door of iron bars was closed and locked behind him.

Old Buck ate his supper greedily, wiped his bearded mouth with a blue bandana, and stretched himself out on his hard and narrow bed. Everything was quiet now, save for the ceaseless chirping of a cricket somewhere under the jail floor. The rays of the little electric in the corridor lighted the cell but dimly, and threw the shadows of the door's bars in weird, snaky, black lines against the outer stone wall. Old Buck looked slyly across to where his cell-mates, his son Oliver and Cat-Eye Mayfield, sat on a pair of soap boxes. He glanced toward the door, rose and tiptoed over to them.

"I reckon we'll try it tonight, boys," he whispered. "Tonight'll do as well as any other time, I reckon. Ef it fails, it'll jest haf to fail. Better go to bed, both o' ye. But don' take off nothin' but yore boots. Watch me; and when ye see me give the signal, take yore place whar we've done agreed. Now rickollect, boys, the feller 'at makes the least bobble gits the thrashin' of his life from me!"

The two nodded and began to remove their footwear. The old clan chief went back to his bed, pulled off his boots and threw them noisily to the floor as was his wont, and hid his huge figure under the gray blankets.

All through the hour that followed, Old Buck watched the corridor covertly. Then he saw just what he expected to see and had been waiting for: John Bird brought a small table, a chair and a newspaper, and



proceeded to make himself comfortable a few feet from the iron-latticed door.

Now this night jailer never failed to become drowsy at about the time when most people are going to bed, and nobody knew it better than the men he guarded. Soon he began to nod in spite of himself, and Old Buck Wolfe rose without a betraying sound; he took from his bed ten feet of strong wire, which he had cunningly smuggled into his cell a few days before, and very deftly made a slip-noose at one end of it. This done, he threw out

a hand toward Mayfield and his son Oliver; they rose noiselessly, and stole to a point beside the iron door.

The high light of the scheme crept forward cautiously. He thrust the slip-noose out, dropped it over the shoulders of the nodding jailer, and with a violent backward surge, jerked him from his chair and pinned him hard against the door's bars. Oliver Wolfe quickly put an arm through and caught Bird around the neck; with the other hand he shut off the outcry Bird strove so desperately to make. Cat-Eye Mayfield snatched a big revolver and a ring of heavy keys from the jailers figure, and within another moment he had shot back the bolt that had held him a prisoner!

"Bring them 'ar three new wash towels from the washin' room, Cat-Eye," whispered Old Buck. "We're shorely a-goin' to do this here thing up right and tight whilst we're about it."

One of the new towels was knotted hard and fast over John Bird's mouth, making it impossible for him to call out; the other two were used to bind Bird's hands and feet. The three mountaineers then pulled on their boots, found their hats, put the night jailer into the cell they had so recently occupied and locked the door upon him, and hastened to liberate the rest of the Wolves.

"Now," grinned the leader, after they had gained the cover of the outside darkness, "now fo' the basin and a big kag o' yaller cawn-juice edzactly seventeer year old come next berry-pickin' time. I was a-savin' it, Cat-Eye, fo' my friends to drink at my fun'ral."

Twenty minutes later, they climbed aboard an eastbound C. C. & O. coal train, which had stopped at Johnsville to take on water for the locomotive. There would be no difficulty whatever in getting off at the sharp grade just beyond Wolfe's Creek.

John Bird did not succeed in ridding his mouth of the towel, though he struggled until he was faint. He resigned himself to the inevitable, and there was a deathlike silence in the jail—save for the ceaseless chirping of a cricket somewhere under the floor.

XVI

WHEN the first afternoon's sawing was done, Little Buck Wolfe went to his adoring old grandmother's cabin for his supper. He had been taking his meals at the new house; but his mother was now entertaining the Masons

and the Fairs, and she had her hands full without caring for him. Shortly after nightfall, he turned toward a small, rough building that stood not far from the mill. This little building had two rooms; one of them was furnished with a cheap bed and a cheap dresser, while the other contained a desk and a chair, a table, and an iron safe that now held four weeks' pay for the twenty-six carpenters, masons, and millwrights. Wolfe stopped at the door of his office and looked upward; except for a thick bank of clouds that lay low in the west, the sky was filled from horizon to zenith with very bright stars.

A moment later, he sank into his swivel chair, took a tally-sheet from his desk, and began to figure by the light of an oil lamp.



The mill had, he found, cut two thousand dollars' worth of choice lumber in five hours! There were, he told himself, big

gold mines that did not pay as this saw-mill was going to pay.

Just then there came to his ears the hum of merry voices, which was followed by a sharp rap at the door. He called out an invitation to enter. The door swung stiffly inward, and the Masons, the Fairs, Granny Wolfe, Tot Singleton and her father and a spotted hound came trooping in. Fair and the colonel wore overcoats; the women wore wraps.

"You be the spokesman, Alex," said Colonel Mason, with a sly wink at the general manager.

Old Singleton tugged at his sunburned, black beard and laughed like a happy, healthy boy.

"How about a 'possum-hunt, Little Buck?" he asked.

"It's too dry, isn't it?" said Wolfe. "I'm afraid a dog couldn't pick up a trail at all, tonight."

"It hain't rained—durned ef I know when it was!" chattered Granny Wolfe. "Wisht I may die ef ever I seed another sech a dry summer and fall sence I was borned. Would ye gi' me a match, Little Buck, honey? This here contrary old pipe it's gone out ag'in."

"Why not have a cigar?" Whitney Fair suggested sportively, drawing a light-brown weed from a vest pocket.

"I be consarned ef I don't try it oncet, anyhow!" laughed the garrulous old wo-

man. "I allus would try 'most anything oncet."

She applied a burning match to the cigar, and went to puffing with all her might, greatly to Whitney Fair's amusement.

"Yes," Alex Singleton agreed seriously, "it's too dry fo' a dawg to trail good. A feller just couldn't catfoot atter squirrels all now! But these here folks they're all dead sot on a 'possum-hunt, and I've done j'ined my symp' thies wi' their'n. The's a lot o' pe'simmon-trees jest a-hangin' full down thar close to whar yore little railroad meets the big railroad, and we might find a 'possum or two in them trees 'thout havin' to depend on the dawg to trail. And as the steam hain't went down in the ingyne yit, we wondered ef we couldn't have what Miss Alice thar calls a 'scursion as well as a 'possum-hunt. We could put some chairs on a lumber flat, ye know."

"Come along, like a good fellow," urged Fair, smiling a cold smile that temporarily effaced the cleft from his chin. "The safe will be all right, won't it?"

"I don't see why it shouldn't be," Wolfe answered. He threw off his weariness, and entered into the spirit of the thing. "I'll run up to the mill and get the locomotive and a flat," he continued, "and pick you up somewhere on the track below. While you're waiting for me, Alex, you might ask my mother for half a dozen chairs, and get about two lanterns ready, eh?"

Singleton nodded joyously. The seven callers and the dog then hastened into the cool, starry night.

Wolfe shaved himself and put on his one presentable suit of clothing, which required fifteen minutes. When this was



done, he thrust a pair of buckskin gloves and a small flashlight into his pocket, and hurried toward the mill.

His brother Nathan, the watchman, challenged him faithfully. He instructed Nathan in case of trouble to call Weaver, who was now the mill's foreman, and who stayed at the big and rough boarding-house that had been erected for the accommodation of the "furriners" of the operating crew. Then Wolfe went to the geared locomotive, threw fresh coal into the furnace, and coupled to a lumber flat.

He met the others at a point close to the new dwelling that was to be given to his father, and took them aboard. Alex Sin-

gleton rode on the fireman's seat with his dog in his lap.

They stopped near the C. C. & O. siding. Granny Wolfe knocked the fire from her first cigar, and put the half-smoked weed in her pocket to save it. Alex Singleton took up one of the lighted lanterns, and set his feet in a narrow, laurel-lined trail that led off westward. Behind him in the order named went Granny Wolfe, the Masons, the Fairs, young Wolfe, and Tot Singleton.

Miss Alice Fair began to lag purposely, and soon there was a distance of some fifteen yards between her and her father, who carried the second lantern.

"That bank of clouds ahead looks like rain, Arnold," she said—plainly, to make conversation.

"Yes," agreed Wolfe; "and we need it."

"You've been avoiding me, Arnold."

He admitted it.

"Because you didn't want to be near me—which, of course, is a very simple conclusion!"

"Er, yes," he said.

"Why didn't you want to be near me?"

"Because we have nothing in common now, Alice," he told her. "It's—er, your own decree, and it's the best for both of us, I'm sure. I'm not the kind of fellow you'd care for with the only affection worth while. We'd be unhappy if we were married to each other. The time to part ways is now. Don't you agree with me, Alice?"

"I certainly do!" There was a tiny note of desperation in her voice; she had tried to make up, and failed. "I don't wonder at your forgetting me so easily," she went on. "You fell in love with me so easily, you know."

"Yes. I'm twenty-four. I felt the real need of the fine, understanding companionship of a good woman. You were the only young woman I knew intimately; I'd studied almost day and night trying to make up for a youth that had been entirely lost, so far as education was concerned, and I hadn't time to be a sociable fellow. I didn't stop to consider whether we'd be suited to each other—you were so pretty, you know, Alice."

"Thanks!" with stinging sarcasm. "But I'm fading now—am I?"

"I think you'll always be pretty," he said very seriously.



She looked backward and laughed at him scornfully. "But the impossible Miss Singleton——"

"She's not impossible," interrupted Wolfe, who was now somewhat incensed. "In fact, she's one of the finest specimens of humanity I've ever met."

Without another word, Miss Fair hurried on and overtook her father.

Suddenly a hand was placed lightly on Wolfe's arm from behind. He stopped and faced about, and confronted a slender, but well-rounded figure, a feminine figure in dark blue. It was Tot Singleton, and she was trembling violently.

"I overheard—I eavesdropped!" she whispered nervously. "I feel mean about it, Little Buck, and I wanted to tell you for my conscience's sake. To—to think that you, after the way I treated you this afternoon, would take up for me to Miss Alice! It hurts, and I'm ashamed o' myself. Please forgive me, if you can, will you?"

He took both her hands and pressed them warmly. The touch gave him a comfortable thrill. "Forget it!" he smiled.

"You're so nice to me," she cried softly. "But you're mistaken in what you told Miss Alice. I'm little, and mean. I'm just beginnin' to 'arn about myself. I'm a-findin' that half o' the fruit o' the tree o' knowledge is *tears*. Listen, will you—mountain dialect again! I wonder if I'll ever quit thinking in it? Understand me, Little Buck; I'm not exactly ashamed of the mountain dialect."

Wolfe laughed. "You can't go all the way at one leap, Tot, of course; be patient, and keep trying!"

"In some ways, I'm worse than I used to be," she said dejectedly. "I've got so afraid of the dark that is was easy enough for me to make myself believe that I kept close to you and Miss Alice because I didn't dare to stay far enough behind to be out of hearing. I wasn't afraid of the night when I lived back here in these hills. I wonder a lot about that, Little Buck. Maybe it was because I was a part of the night myself then!"

Wolfe looked at her with increased interest. She was beginning to show new facets. There was something quite wonderful about her.

"I'll be falling in love with you, Tot," he told her, "the very first thing you know."

"That's not likely," laughed Tot.

She hurried past him, and soon disap-

peared around a sharp bend in the narrow trail.

Wolfe walked on rapidly, and overtook the rest of the party just as the deep music of the dog's baying fell upon the chilly air.

The voice of Alex Singleton boomed out, "By the Eternal, ef he hain't treed a'ready! Treed by sight! Hold the 'possum, Rock! Hi, thar, Rock—don't ye lose him! Good old dawg, Rock!"

"I'll be durned ef this here hain't good luck," said Granny Wolfe. "Light out atter him, Alex!"

They followed their guide, who turned to his right and picked his way through a copse of laurel, and drew up at a persimmon-tree laden with frost-bitten fruit. Singleton kept his lantern swaying behind him, while his alert gaze searched the branches of the tree for a pair of round and glistening black eyes. He wished he had a good pine torch!

"I see him!" he cried finally. "Le's hide the lights onder out hats, Mr. Fair, and everybody look right in the tiptop o' the tree."

They saw between them and the starry sky a round, dark bulk that was as motionless as the mountain under their feet. The old hillman passed his lantern to Colonel Mason, sat down, and removed his boots. A few minutes, and he had climbed to a point within ten feet of the persimmon-eater.

"Look out below thar!" he shouted.

He began to shake the uppermost branch with both hands. There was a sudden dull thump on the ground below. With a yelp of delight, the spotted dog dashed forward and seized the little animal by the throat. The opossum stiffened, and feigned death perfectly, but the hound was not one whit deceived. Alex Singleton climbed down, tied a stick in the 'possum's mouth to prevent its sharp teeth doing damage, pulled on his boots, rose and led the others proudly to another persimmon. For one night, old Alex was king.

The sport kept up until midnight, when Colonel Mason suggested that they return to the basin.

Just as those on the flat were settling themselves for the run, just as Wolfe was reaching for the throttle-lever, there came tearing through the stillness the dull but mighty roar of the sawmill whistle. It was somehow like a death-knell. It blanched the cheeks of every member of the party. The long blast died out in its own echoes. Then there came a short blast that ended abruptly; it was as though

the hand that had held the whistle-cord had been suddenly stricken down.

Wolfe opened the throttle as far as he dared. With the other hand he opened the valve to the sandbox.

When they had covered three miles, a voice from the flat ahead sent tremors to Wolfe's heart. The voice said but one small word, but that one small word meant destruction.

"Fire!"

Fire, when the fine, new mill had run but half a day!

It was a cataclysm.

XVII

SOON the now thickly overcast heavens became lighted everywhere ahead by a lurid, blood-red glow. It was evident that the conflagration was great and steadily growing. Granny Wolfe knelt on the lumber flat, turned her seamed and troubled face toward the Omnipotent, and begged that a rain might come and put to rout the element that is at once mankind's best friend and worst enemy. The rest of the party kept grimly silent.

When the little locomotive pushed its one car through the jaws of Devil's Gate and into the basin, those on board were



greeted by a spectacle that was nothing less than appalling. Every one of the deep and finely-timbered coves was a raging furnace of dead leaves, dead wood, and resinous pine, which were as dry as tinder. The big mill itself was a raging furnace. It was already too late for any rain except a cloudburst to save anything whatever. The devastation promised to be complete within a very short time.

"This is the end," Wolfe kept saying bitterly to himself. "This is the end of it all."

The locomotive and its flat came to a jarring, grinding halt a hundred yards from the burning mill, and the hunting party alighted. The "furriners" of the mill crew, most of the Singletons, and the wo-

men and children of the Wolfes were gathered together before the blazing plant in an awed, helpless mass of humanity. The children were crying with fear; some of the women were sobbing aloud; the men were pale and silent.

Weaver, the foreman, and Nathan Wolfe, the watchman, hurried to meet the party that had just arrived. The watchman was burned about the hands and face and arms; his clothing was scorched and blackened and torn.

"Well?" the general manager said unsteadily.

The foreman looked toward Nathan Wolfe, then turned his face away. Nathan Wolfe gulped, and tears began to sting in the broken blisters of his cheeks.

"Here's how it was, Little Buck," he said in a shaken drawl. "A fire was started up in every cove, it seemed to me, at about the same time. As soon as I seed it, I made a streak fo' the whistle-cord. Somebody slipped up and grabbed me from ahind. o' me, and throwed me down hard. This man was half-drunk, but he was as strong as a bear all the same, and I jest couldn't git loose to save my life. Three other men carried bucket after bucket o' mile-ile upstairs, and poured it out, and 'en set it afire. When the ile it was a-burnin' good, the big man he le' me go.

"I tried awful hard to put the fire out, Little Buck, but I jest couldn't do it. The water I throwed on the burnin' ile didn't do nothin' but spread the fire. Then I made fo' the whistle-cord ag'in, and this time I 'got to it. I'd done blowed one long blow, and was a-startin' to blow ag'in, when the same man 'at grabbed me afore grabbed me and throwed me out o' the ingyne-room door and kep' me out. Mr. Weaver and them 'ar other furriners they run in then, but they met about twenty men wi' clubs, and they couldn't do nothin'. And purty soon it was too late to even try to save anything. Was the mill inshored, Little Buck?"

"The insurance men were to be out tomorrow," Little Buck Wolfe answered hoarsely. "They'd refused the risk twice before. But you didn't tell me who set the mill and woods on fire, Nathan."

"I hates to tell ye, Little Buck," sadly, "but you're plum' shore to find it out anyhow. It was our own people. They must ha' broke jail. It was pap who grabbed me the twicet, and it was Unc' Brian Wolfe and our brother Oliver and Cat-Eye Mayfield who carried the ile upstairs

and set the mill afire. The whole outfit of 'em was a-drinkin' hard."

Young Wolfe straightened under this, the greatest blow of his life, and folded his arms across his deep, broad chest. He stared toward the furnaces that lighted the whole of the basin as bright as noonday and roared as though they were Gehennas filled with lost souls; his hopes were all in those fires and burning, burning to gray ashes. Everything was gone. The Masons were left practically penniless in their old days; it was this, perhaps, that hurt him most—he could have wept over it. There had come to his whitened countenance a look that kept away even those of his friends and kinsmen who loved him best.

Suddenly there appeared from the bush to the eastward the Wolfe clan and Cat-Eye Mayfield. They reeled a little, and they were full of defiance. The Wolfes were now armed with rifles, which they had taken from their homes after their womenfolk and children had gone to the burning mill. They halted a few rods from the awed multitude. Their leader, staggering for the first time under alcoholic influence, shook his great fist toward the man who was losing most, and lifted his Goliath voice in tones of black triumph:

"Who wins now?"

The son did not even appear to be aware that the father had addressed him. There fell a silence that the noise of the near-by hungry flame was scarcely able to dissipate. Now no woman sobbed; no child wept.

"Who wins now?" the giant mountaineer repeated.

At last Little Buck Wolfe turned his head and looked toward his half-drunken father. A great deal of the suffering left his face, and a pity that was akin to the divine shone from his eyes. The old clan chief went pale in spite of himself. Came at that moment an old voice that seemed to hang in the air, like the smoke of incense—

"*And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, a-bein' inter'p'eted, The place o' a skull.*" Saint Mark; fifteen, twenty-two."

Like a John the Baptist out of the wilderness, Grandpap Singleton, the Prophet, stepped before them. Until this moment, his people had not seen him since the time of the mill's starting. His mind was almost completely broken. His snow-white head was bare, and his lean face was strangely haggard. In one hand he carried a dark, round object that the others

did not then recognize for the pitiful, tragic thing it was.

He went to a point close beside the young man whom his good old heart had loved so truly and so well. He stretched one of his long, thin arms toward Picketts



Dome, which stood out plainly in the fire's light and in bold relief against the red, red heavens. The others looked, and saw on the summit of the peak a great ironwood cross. He had erected it there in the hope that his children and the children of his

children might see it when temptation assailed them, and not forget.

"Finish it!" he cried to Old Buck Wolfe, and it was a terrible condemnation. "Finish it! Loose the silver cord, and break the golden bowl—break the pitcher at the fountain, and the wheel at the cistern! Take this good man, yore own flesh and blood, yu thar and nail him hand and foot. Spit upon him, and give him vinegar and gall to drink when he axes fo' water. Pierce his side, and cast lots fo' his clothin'. Finish it!"

The demented patriarch held up the dark, round object he had brought. It was a crudely woven crown of thorns. He pressed it down upon the brow of Little Buck Wolfe, the Arnold Mason that was, who stood as dumb and as motionless as a tree; and if the thorns that sent several tiny drops of blood trickling down the pallid face gave pain, there was not the least sign of it.

Save for the Wolfe clan, Cat-Eye Mayfield and Whitney Fair, the multitude groaned at the sight. It was eerie, and it was also somehow holy. Tot Singleton sank to her knees and sobbed aloud. The Wolfe clan, and even Cat-Eye Mayfield, became suddenly sober. Old Buck shuddered. Long forgotten things were gripping his soul and making him ashamed of himself. He dragged a tremulous, grimy hand across his forehead and started slowly, drawn irresistibly, toward the best of his five sons; and his footsteps led him all too near the burning plant.

Young Wolfe removed the chaplet of

thorns from his brow, and put it down at his feet.

"It makes me afraid," he muttered; "it makes me afraid," and he went to meet his father.

Then the great, hot smokestack swooped downward with a mighty swishing roar. It was Little Buck who saw Old Buck's imminent danger first.

He leaped forward, shouting, "Out of the way! Run! Quick!"

His father stopped as though the words had paralyzed him. He appeared to be unaccountably dazed. The great stack loosened a beam from the roof which flew out and struck him across his shoulders, and bore him to the ground on his face.

"He'p me!" he screamed smotheredly. "I'm a-burnin' to death—he'p me, fo' God's sake!"

Every man of those present dashed toward him. There was no time to be lost in looking for levers; if the wheels of fate were to be cheated, bare hands must lift the smouldering beam; human flesh must voluntarily be seared.

"Drag him out, Little Buck, when we raise; all together, boys—go to it!" Alex Singleton bellowed.

They went to it all together, Wolfes and Singletons face to face and shoulder to shoulder, and there rose the sickening scent of scorched flesh. Little Buck Wolfe dragged his father's giant figure to safety. The others dropped the searing beam and ran. A blazing wall fell and hid the spot where Old Buck had lain.

"His pore back!" wept Granny Wolfe. "It's all burnt and blistered! He'p me to take him home, Nathan, honey. Will ye go home, Buck, pore boy?"

And her favorite son answered weakly, "I'll go anywhar ye wants me to go, mother. Fo' because I'm already in hell."

It began to rain then. It was a slow, drizzling rain that could have saved nothing, had it begun hours before.

XVIII

TEN minutes after the slow rain set in, the grounds about the almost consumed building were deserted save for the general manager. Wolfe had not been able to leave the thing that had been his palm of victory and the pride of his heart. Colonel Mason and a number of others had insisted upon his seeking shelter, to no avail; they had then insisted upon remaining with him, but he wouldn't permit it. He walked slowly and alone, like a sentinel upon his beat, and watched

the flames die down and leave a great pile of glowing coals and red-hot, twisted iron and steel. When finally he turned toward the house he had built for his father, he was wet to the skin.

Just as he left the dimming red glare, there came to his ears a dull rumbling that was like an explosion of dynamite. He paid little attention to it then, though he remembered it vividly enough afterward.

Already he had decided upon a course for the future.



He would go to one of the lumbering districts of the Northwest, and establish himself there; he would pay back, the Masons first, every cent of

the money that had been lost in the ill-starred Unaka Lumber Company. It would require the best part of his life, perhaps, but he would do it. It should be his one purpose.

Whitney Fair met him on the new house's veranda. They were about to pass, when Fair said gruffly, "I'll take the key to the office door, if you please."

Wolfe frowned. He knew why Fair was going to the office. The wonder of it was that Fair had not demanded the key sooner. He meant, of course, to telephone Sheriff Starnes at Johnsville, and notify him of the outrageous doings of the escaped prisoners.

"The key, if you please!" Fair growled.

In no heart are the ties of blood stronger than in the mountain heart. Wolfe drew back. His kinsmen had wronged him deeply, it was true, but they were still his kinsmen. They hadn't had the advantage that had been his.

He took the key from his pocket, and gave it over. There was, plainly, nothing else to do. Anyway, he told himself, the chances were that the jail delivery had already become known, and Sheriff Starnes and his posse were perhaps even then on their way out to the basin. Whitney Fair turned the collar of his greatcoat up close around his neck, and hastened toward the crude little office.

Wolfe entered the new house without rapping. There was a cheery log fire in the living-room. Old Buck Wolfe, his blistered back bandaged, sat very straight on a couch.

"Where are the others?" his son asked.

"I run 'em out," sourly.

"Why?"

"I wanted to be by my lowdown self, damn it," answered the old mountaineer. "Whose fine dwellin' is this here?"

"Yours and mother's. I built it for you."

Old Buck nodded thoughtfully. "That's what they told me, but I jest couldn't believe it was the truth to save my life. And whose fine fiddle is that up 'ar on the mantel?"

"Yours. I bought it for you."

Old Buck cleared his throat. "That's what they told me, but I jest couldn't believe it. I figgered you'd got married to Alex Singleton's Tot and lived here wi' her. Hadn't ha' been fo' them Singletons, I reckon I'd ha' done been burnt to a cinder; wouldn't I?"

"There's no doubt of it," promptly.

"Little Buck," the father said with striking earnestness, "no man cain't be the same after he's look death in the eyes, and tasted of it, like I've done tonight. Death it showed me things. Death and the cross and the crown of thorns. I'm a-tellin' ye, son, a man can shorely live a whole etarnity in his one dyin' minute—though I'm no coward, and don't ye fo'git that. I reckon I been the meanest, lowdownest polecat 'at ever lived, hain't I?"

"I guess not." Wolfe the younger turned his face away. "There are worse men than you."

Silence fell between them. Old Buck's fifth son then went gloomily to the semi-darkness of the veranda, and dropped into a chair.

After what seemed a very long time to Little Buck Wolfe, a slim feminine figure, in clothes that were wet and bedraggled, ran through the gateway, ran up to him, and put a hand rather hard on his shoulder.

"Tot!" he exclaimed. "Where've you been, Tot?"

"I followed Mr. Fair," breathlessly. She dropped to her knees beside his chair and went on, "He told Sheriff Starnes everything over the phone. They'd already found out about the escape, and Deputy Sheriff Howard Cartwright'll be here with a posse before very long. And—listen! The office safe has been dynamited and robbed! Mr. Fair found your gloves and flashlight lyin' on the floor, Little Buck, and he thinks you did it! He thinks that's why you stayed behind. He told the sheriff it was you. Oh, I'm so sorry; it seems

that the—the Lord is tryin' to see how much you can bear!"



"I heard the explosion that opened the safe," Wolfe told Tot. "How I wish I'd investigat-

ed then!"

He felt through one of his pockets after another. Both gloves and flashlight were gone.

"I must have left them in the locomotive's cab," he reasoned aloud, "and some ransacker found them. Afterward the ransacker found the dynamite in the tool-house, and the safe in the office. It all fits in very nicely, Tot."

"Yes. How much money was there in the safe?" she asked.

"Twenty-eight hundred."

He went to his feet, and at that instant his father appeared on the veranda. Old Buck walked slowly and with considerable pain. He had overheard the conversation between his son and the daughter of old Alex Singleton.

"The fire it was all my fault," he confessed. "Ef it hadn't ha' been fo' me, nothin' wouldn't ha' been set afire at all. I headed the whole thing, me and a kag o' lick did. Tot, I want you to go and tell Oliver and Brian and the others 'at they must light a rag out o' here and keep from a-bein' arrested. Tell 'em to go away back to the Balsam Cone section. Their wimmenfolks and children can foller 'em after a little while. I made this here debt, and I'll pay it all myself. Tell 'em that, Tot, please."

Tot Singleton looked questioningly toward Little Buck, who said no word, gave no sign.

"Please, Tot," the old hillman begged, "go and tell Oliver and Brian and the rest what I said. The debt it's all mine, and I hain't a-go'in' to let nobody else pay none of it. Please go, Tot!"

"Must I?" Tot whispered to Little Buck.

She had no answer whatever. After half a minute of waiting, she disappeared in the rainy night.

A quarter of an hour afterward, the clan stole hurriedly up to its leader. Old Buck asked them to go, while there was yet time. But they would not agree to it. They wouldn't be yellow. One man should not pay all of the debt to the law.

"Ef you'd jest go along wi' us, Buck,"

finally said Brian Wolfe, "then we might go."

"But I cain't hardly walk!" Old Buck exclaimed. "I'd be nothin' but a drawback and dead weight on ye. Go on, boys! You cain't resk a-bein' sent to the State penitency, a-leavin' yore famblies to make their own way; don't ye see? It hain't fair to 'em! Yore fust duty lays to yore wimmenfolks and children, boys; hain't ye got hoss sense enough to know that much?"

Little Buck Wolfe caught his strapping brother Oliver by the shoulders and shook him.

"You've got to do it, Oliver," he said hoarsely. "I'll hide him—" he pointed to his father, and looked covertly toward the open front door—"somewhere; and when he's able to travel he can follow the rest of you to the Balsam Cone country. You've got to do it!"

"Atter the way we treated you?" Oliver Wolfe's voice was almost pathetic. "You'll shorely hide him?"

"I certainly will. You'd better hurry, or it'll be too late, Oliver."

Not until they were gone did Little Buck Wolfe realize fully just what he had done. He had put himself into the place of an accessory to the crime of arson, and he was liable to almost as much punishment as the principals themselves! The thought was staggering to him. He began to pace the veranda floor nervously.

Tot Singleton appeared before him. She understood fully. She strove to make him feel that he had but done right.

"Don't feel so blue about it, Little Buck," she said to him gently. "What else could you do? Their families need them more than the prison needs them. They're as sorry now as the penitentiary ever could make them. Besides, the mountain man can't stand imprisonment for long; most of 'em wouldn't live through the fifteen years—that's what I understood Mr. Fair to say it would be. You m-mustn't worry, Little Buck!"

Wolfe stepped to his father and took him by the arm.

"We must go," he whispered. "Cartwright will soon be here. I must have you hidden before he comes. We must go!"

"I guess," Old Buck demurred, "I'd better let Cartwright have me."

"No! Let's go—for mother's sake. You must think of her, and not of yourself. You've been too unkind to her in the past." He was fairly dragging his sire toward the steps. "Quick—we must be

quick. Fair may come back at any minute, and he—let's go!"

Old Buck permitted his son to lead him out of the yard and away in the murky drizzle.

A bleak, gray dawn was slowly breaking over the scene of black desolation when the two men arrived at a small-mouthed cavern in the side of the Big Blackfern.



The elder of the pair squeezed himself through the rocky opening with some difficulty. The other placed a great flat stone over the hole, and almost ran back to the new house to tell his mother and the Masons and Tot Singleton good-bye; he meant to start for the far-away Northwest immediately.

Whitney Fair met him at the gate. Fair had discovered that every man of the escaped Wolfes had disappeared; he was purple in the face, and his small, pale-blue eyes glittered like those of an angry animal.

He seized one of the lapels of Wolfe's coat and cried savagely, "You'll pay for this! You warned them, and that makes you as guilty as they are—give me the money you took from the safe!"

"I didn't take any money from the safe," Wolfe replied with a level calmness that surprised even himself.

"You did!"

"Be careful, Mr. Fair!"

Whitney Fair went ashen instead of purple. "And there are some other things against you, too," he fumed. "You had an agreement by which you were to have this land for a pittance an acre when the sawing was done; you drew your salary for—er, more than a year in advance. Oh, but I'll have the net around you good and hard before you know what's happened! Hand that money right back, you thief!"

There was a quick step behind him. Colonel Mason, tall, patrician, and now white, caught his arm.

"Let him go, sir!" the colonel ordered hotly. "He is no thief—and anybody that says he is, sir, lies outright!"

Fair sniffed like a disgusted hound.

"Meaning that I have lied outright, Colonel?"

"Exactly that," the old Southerner said quickly. "If the shoe doesn't fit, take it off!"

The cleft in Whitney Fair's chin deepened in a black scowl. He swore. He took his right hand from Wolfe's coat lapel, tore his arm from Colonel Mason's grip, and struck Colonel Mason in the chest—

The world turned as red as blood to Little Buck Wolfe. He couldn't stand idly by and see the man who had been to him a better father than his own father thus brutally mistreated. He went at Fair like a combination of cyclone, pile-driver and battering-ram and, with his two fists pounded Fair until his coarse face was almost unrecognizable. The worsted man sank dazedly to the wet ground.

"The next time you feel like striking anybody that's seventy-five pounds lighter and twenty years older than you," advised Wolfe, "be sure that there's no son of his near to take his part."

He led the colonel aside, and took him by the hand.

"I'm going away," he whispered, and he hastily explained why. "You can see that the evidence is big against me, and I can't possibly spare the time that it would take to spend a term in prison. I'll write when I think it's safe. Tell my two mothers and Tot good-by for me. I—"

Strong man that he was, he had choked. Colonel Mason choked, too.

"Son," he whispered thickly, "be careful when you write. Fate has left nothing undone, it seems—Fair is soon to be appointed postmaster at Johnsville! But you don't owe us anything, Arnold, my boy. We are willing to accept life's brimming cup of bitterness along with life's honey-sweetness. It was not your fault, certainly! But I must admit that the case against you looks bad, for Fair is undoubtedly influential, and you really had better get out from under. Good luck to you, and God be with you always—"

He was unable to say more. Mrs. Mason and Old Buck Wolfe's wife ran toward them from the house. The two women had seen and overheard much; they had easily guessed the truth. Wolfe embraced them tenderly, and kissed them on the cheek with reverence. Then he tore himself from their arms, and went rapidly toward the foot of scarred Lost Trail Mountain.

Once behind the border of burned and

blackened laurels that stood along the edge of the basin's bottom, he noted that the slow rain had ceased, and halted and looked back. He could see the long, strong arm of the law, in the shape of the doughty Deputy Sheriff Howard Cartwright and a posse, coming by way of Devil's Gate!

Wolfe ran toward the other end of the basin, keeping always behind the border of blackened laurel. Before he had covered half a mile, he met Alex Singleton and his son, Fightin' Lon. Both the Singletons wore thick bandages over their palms. They questioned Wolfe anxiously, and he told them all there was to tell.

"You shorely can't slip out o' the basin now," declared old Alex. "That man Cartwright, I knows him. He used to be a revenuer. He's got eyes like forty hawks; they say he never fails to bring in his man. Better stay hid in the basin untel tomorrow night, anyhow, Little Buck. I'll hide ye in the apple-hole onder my cabin floor, and they caim't never find ye thar! Come on wi' me—quick."

The fugitive was hidden among bushels and bushels of green and yellow pippins. The boards were put back into place above him, and a crude table was dragged over the spot. Lying down there under the floor, he heard Alex Singleton and his son take chairs to the front doorway and sit down noisily. He heard stout Mrs. Singleton whistling one of her old-fashioned hymns in the lean-to.

A long hour afterward, there came to



his sensitive ears sounds made by the tramping of dozens of human feet and ironshod hoofs.

Cartwright accosted the Singleton leader sharply. "Seen any o' the Wolfes?"

"Seed 'em all last night at the fire," quite readily, "and I seed Little Buck a-runnin' toward the Lost Trail

from his pap's new house somethin' like a hour and a half ago."

The deputy then demanded pointedly, "Are any of them here?"

It had become, after a fashion, a battle

of wits. Alex Singleton rose in the doorway.

"Howard Cartwright," he almost roared, "d' ye thing fo' a minute 'at I'd have little enough sense to hide anybody from the law? I hain't a-bankerin' atter the penitency sence I've seed the inside of it, and le' me tell ye that. But ef you think I'm a-lyin', s'arch my house and satisfy yore-self!" It was adroit.

The posse had already surrounded the cabin. Cartwright entered and looked carefully in the loft, under the beds, in the two big chimneys of stone—everywhere but in the apple-hole.

He apologized after he had finished searching the premises. They told him that it was entirely and absolutely all right. Mrs. Singleton even stopped her everlasting whistling long enough to tell him that it was all right.

XIX

OLD BUCK WOLFE found the darkness stifling. He crept back to the cavern's narrow mouth, rested himself on an elbow, and looked through a small aperture. He watched his son whip Fair. He watched his son bid the Masons and his mother good-by, and run toward Lost Trail Mountain. He saw the minions of the law enter the basin, saw them searching, saw them go away empty-handed, and because they had gone empty-handed, a slow, pale smile of triumph spread over his bearded face.

But the smile did not last. His keen gaze soon picked out a tall and powerful figure in officer-blue that was sneaking back on foot along the fire-blackened side of the Lost Trail. Deputy Sheriff Cartwright, who had never failed to bring in his man, had not yet given up; he hid himself at a point that commanded a fair view of the whole basin, and began to wait with the patience of Job.

Everything was so very still now. Not a breath of air was stirring. The clouds had lifted somewhat, and Old Buck Wolfe's gaze came to rest on the great ironwood cross that poor Grandpap Singleton, the broken-minded, had erected on the summit of majestic Picketts Dome as a reminder to his people. The same queer, shuddery feeling that had assailed the chief of the Wolfes the night before now gripped him again. Between him and the sacred emblem of life and death the misdeeds of his past stood up like the spirits of gaunt, grim, evil giants. Finally a sense of utter shame overpowered him,

and he wiped at his eyes with a big, blue bandana. Words out of the mouth of Grandpap Singleton, the Prophet, came back to him forcefully, and brought him face to face with his own soul:

"To them as thinks the' ain't no God, the' ain't none, so far as they're concerned."

His lips jerked, then moved stiffly.

"Who but a All-Pow'ful Bein' could ha' made the sun and the moon and the stars and the world? These things had to have a beginnin', shorely. They never jest happened. Sech big things as them cain't jest happen. From this day on, I'm mebbe a-goin' to do my little argyin' on t'other side o' the fence."

The clouds lowered, like a broad, feathery blanket dropped from the skies, and the



ironwood cross was hidden from his sight.

By nightfall he was very hungry. He had eaten nothing since his last meal in the jail at Johnsville. But he bore it with fortitude,

and in his uncouth way tried to be thankful for the tiny stream of water that trickled out of a crevice in the rocks a few yards behind him. The long, dark hours dragged by, and midnight came. Still no one had come to bring him food. He stretched himself out on his side, with his great, shaggy head pillowed on a forearm, and went to sleep.

When morning dawned, he crept to the aperture and peered through cautiously. He saw nothing of Howard Cartwright, but that fact was not proof that the officer had quit the watch. The chances were that Cartwright had only changed positions.

The day passed, and night fell again, and still Old Buck Wolfe had had nothing to eat. He was ready to run any ordinary risk to satisfy his gnawing hunger now. He put his hands against the flat stone that his son had placed over the narrow mouth of the cavern, and overturned it. Another minute, and he was standing beside an upright, charred shaft of wood that had been a fine yellow poplar tree. Something drew his gaze upward; he saw millions of frosty, brightly-twinkling stars—promises, Grandpap Singleton had called them.

He began to move slowly and soundlessly down toward the deep gash that had hidden for so long his moonshine still. Save for its upper edges, this little hollow had escaped the fire.

Then a big, dark form stepped suddenly before him, and a voice that he recognized instantly inquired in low and guarded tones, "Buck, old feller, is that you?"

Old Buck choked back an oath that had come unbidden to his tongue. Had not Alex Singleton helped to save him from death in the worst of all its shapes, death by burning?

"Yes, Alex," he answered in a small voice, "it's me. I'm mighty nigh it starved plum' to a shadder. I jest had to git out, Alex, and try to find me somethin' to eat."

"Now le's be awful keerful," Singleton whispered. "Le's go to the cave, Buck."

Wolfe led the way in. Singleton followed close behind him. The two groped their way several rods back into the pitchy darkness before they stopped.

"I'd ha' done brung ye somethin' to eat, Buck," old Alex said, as they sat down together, "ef Cartwright hadn't ha' been a-watchin' so hard. Here, take this here basket; it's got three fried chickens, half of a whole b'iled hawg ham, and a big pone o' cawnbread in it. And take this here cawfee-pot; the cawfee's all sweetened and ready. Tot she fixed it all up fo' ye, Buck, and the cawfee's got a tear in it—damned ef I didn't see it drap, myself. Now, old feller, eat ontel ye blamed nigh bust, ef ye wants to!"

Wolfe took the basket of food and the pot of coffee with an eagerness that was wholly pitiful.

"Alex," he said tremulously, "I'm so glad to git this here grub 'at I'd ax the blessin' ef I jest knowed what to say. Would you mind a-doin' it fo' me, Alex? I'll sartainly be obleeged to ye."

"Shorely, I will," Singleton agreed gladly.

Old Wolfe ate ravenously, while his companion explained, "Yore folks'd ha' fetched ye somethin' to eat afore now, Buck, but they didn't know whar ye was at. Little Buck never had much of a chanst to tell 'em, I guess. But he told me, and I'm a-goin' to take keer of ye. Little Buck he's in a tight place now, as sartain as hell's hot. Robbin' the safe, he'pin' you men git away from the law, assault and batt'ry on Mr. Fair—dang it, they'll pen him fo' life ef they ketch him! But they ain't likely to ketch him, Buck."

The food in Wolfe's mouth began to taste like wood. He rose there in the cavern's darkness, and made an odd noise in his throat.

"Pore boy—he liked me so much 'at he even named hisself atter me," he choked. "And me—I've treated him like a dawg. Alex, I want ye to do me a big favor. Will ye do it?"

Singleton nodded in the pitchy gloom. "I promise, o' course. Anything on earth."

"Then," Old Buck said shakily, "I want ye to git a mule-killin' hick'ry club, and beat me mighty nigh it to death on my sore back fo' a-bein' what I've been and a-doin' what I've done. Hurry, Alex. I look to ye to keep yore promise."

"I won't do it!"

"You shorely wouldn't be a liar fo' me, Alex!" surprisedly.

"I'd be a durned sight more'n that fo' you, Buck, old feller!"

"By God!" exclaimed Old Buck Wolfe, amazed. "Whar," he asked a moment later, "is Little Buck at?"

"He's jest started on foot through the mountains fo' Virginny," the Singleton leader answered. "He traded me his hoss and saddle and watch fo' a rifle and two hunderd ca'tridges, two blankets, a supply o' grub, a fryin' pan and some tools to eat with, and forty dollars in money. Atter things sawt o' blows over, he'll git



on a train thar in Virginny, and go away off to the No'thwest, whar he's a-goin' to make his fortune and pay back all 'at was lost in the fire."

To old Alex, it seemed a very long time before Wolfe spoke again.

"Alex, I want to ax ye about somethin'. It's bothered me a heap. A few weeks ago, I

found a little cross cut in the ground afore my still, and another one cut in the bark of a tree, and yit another one cut on my cabin floor. Do ye know how come it them crosses was thar?"

"It was pap," Singleton explained. "He takes spells o' wanderin' in his mind, ye know. He cut 'em a night or two afore you found 'em, and them at the still he'd covered w' leaves so's you wouldn't see 'em ontel he'd oncovered 'em. Pap is a pow'ful feller to plan ahead, pore old feller. Well, I'll go now, Buck, but I'll be back at the fust good chanst. You be keerful!"

When his friend had gone, Wolfe crept out of the cavern to get away from the tormenting black stillness. The stars were brighter than ever, and a thin veil of frost had settled down over the ashes of the great fires. The deep mystery of the mountain night was everywhere; it awed Old Buck, and for minutes on end he stood as motionless as the blackened tree-shafts about him. He came to himself with a jerk—

"Robbin' the safe," he mumbled, "he never done it. It was hatched up ag'in him."

He went down to the little whisky still that his own hands had built and operated. The mash-tubs and the copper boiler and worm were all white with frost. He touched the boiler, and felt that it was a contaminating thing—it stung him. There welled up in his bosom a great hatred for it.

"It was you," he said bitterly, "'at made me do what I done. And when I gits through wi' you, you ain't a-goin' to look nothin' at all like yoreself!"

Old Buck had forgotten that the sheriff's ultra-cunning deputy might be near him. His injured back, also, was forgotten. He drew an ax from the cold furnace, and with mighty blows destroyed his false god.

Then he bent his two knees to something that was neither a ginseng root, a wood-chuck's den, nor a moonshine still.

XX

LITTLE BUCK WOLFE seemed much like a soldier fitted out in heavy marching order with his blanket-roll on his shoulder, and his pack on his back, and his rifle in his hand. He stopped and faced about when he had reached the crest of the Big Blackfern. The darkness of the night could not conceal from him the desolation that lay below; he saw it with his eyes shut! The candles in the cabins of the basin's bottom glowed like pale yellow stars in the gloom.

He centered his attention upon the light that shone from the nearest window of old Alex Singleton's cabin, and wondered whether Tot had put it there as a last pitiful shred of farewell to him. He was glad that he had kissed her—it had been an act of impulse—when they parted. The memory of that would be with him, sweet and tender, throughout the years that he must spend buried in the hardest work before the colossal debt could be paid in full. He was convinced now that he really loved

Tot Singleton. And he did. He wouldn't have been human if he hadn't. As for marrying her—there was the debt! He couldn't afford to marry.

It was with a painful swelling of heart and throat that he turned away. Just then a feminine voice called his name. He halted quickly and looked around. A slender figure was hurrying up the dim path toward him.

"Tot!" he cried.

"Yes," she panted. Wait!"

In her hands she carried a rifle. Over one of her shoulders was a blanket-roll



that contained two spare dresses and some other things. She wore dark-blue, and about her head and neck was a heavy scarf that Wolfe himself had bought and given her as a birthday present.

"Where are you going, Tot?" he asked, as she drew up before him.

She hung her head. The butt of the repeater that had been the pride of her brother Lon's heart dropped heavily to the ground. Wolfe stepped closer to her, and took one of her hands.

"Where are you going, Tot?" he repeated softly.

She looked up. "I want to go with you!" in a certain desperation, and more or less tearfully. After all, she was more child than woman.

"But—"

Tot Singleton interrupted, "You'll be lonesome away out there in the cold Northwest. You'll need me. I can do so many things for you. I can cook for you, and wash and mend your clothes and keep 'em nice for you, and—and maybe I can comfort you when the blue days come. I couldn't ever bear it back here now, knowin' that you was so far away and so much alone. I—I wa-want you to m-m-marry me and take me with you, Little Buck! I wanted to ask you when you t-t-told me good-by, but I just c-c-couldn't—"

It ended smotheredly. She had recited it; she had been saying that speech over and over to herself all the way up the tor-

tuous side of the Blackfern. But the simple earnestness of even the recital was one of the most striking things that had come into the life of Little Buck Wolfe.

He drew her hand to his breast and caressed it. The action was wholly involuntary.

"I wish I could take you, Tot," he told her sadly. "I know that I'll need you in a thousand ways. But because I do love you, I can't cheat you of the education that is only fairly begun; I can't take you from the worthwhile things and put half my load on your shoulders. Besides, I'm a fugitive now, you know. And there'll be real hardship. I'm not going straight to the Northwest, Tot."

"But you said——"

"Yes," he nodded. "I decided since leaving your father's house that I'd spend the winter in the wilderness that lies about the head of Doe River, which is probably the wildest place in America; it is very rarely that anybody goes in there, even to hunt. You see, Tot, I won't be safe anywhere out in the world until my so-called crimes—in spite of himself, he winced—"are sort of forgotten. And there's another reason.

"When I was a small boy, Tot, there came to my father's cabin one day a stranger, a youngish man, who was about ready to die. We gathered from his delirious talk that he had come to the mountains for his health. He had with him a funny-looking pointed hammer, and a big magnifying-glass. Just before he passed out, we caught this from his babbling—I haven't forgotten a single syllable of it:

"It's a trick of fate. Wealth—hundreds of thousands—and I've got to die and leave it all—after having been poor all my life! Fate, old girl, you're a damned trickster."

"He had mentioned Doe River Wilderness," Wolfe pursued. "My father thought he must have found gold there. Not very long after the stranger's death, my father and my Uncle Brian went to Doe River Wilderness and spent a few days in a half-hearted search for gold. They found nothing that even looked like it.

"Of course, Tot, I know that the sick man might have been the victim of hallucinations. The chances are strong that he was. But as it's best that I stay hidden for a few months, I may as well try my luck; it will keep my mind occupied, anyway. So you see, Tot, there'll be real hardship."

"But you said you loved me," and one

of the arms of the innocent temptress crept slowly around his neck. "If you love me, Little Buck, Doe River Wilderness will be the finest place in the world to me; it'll be parad-d-d-dise. And I'd do all I could to make it the finest place in the world for you, too. I'd rather lie down and die than to stay behind! Please, won't you let me go?"

Wolfe was entirely human. His resolve began to tremble.

"You might get sick out there," he said uncertainly. "We might not be able to get a doctor at all."

"I'm never sick, Little Buck," she replied quickly. "As for the hardship, I'm used to that; what mountain woman isn't? Listen. I sent Lon to Johnsville for a marriage license, and I've got it here. We can pass by old Preacher Longley Thrash's cabin, and get him to marry 'us. Oh, Little Buck, honey, you must—I just can't stay here now. Why, I—I'll be your d-d-dog!"

He stared at her in amazement. She continued.

"If you think I'm oversteppin'—I'd been believin' you loved me; when you kissed me good-by tonight, I knew it, I knew! I told myself you didn't ask me to go with you because you loved me too much to ask me; and that was exactly the way of it. You're lookin' at it wrong. I'll not stand between you and that old d-debt; I'll help you pay it! Can't you see, Little Buck, you ol' dahlin'?"

Her rifle fell to the ground. Both her arms were around his neck and drawing his face down to hers. Among the stars that were mirrored in her sea-blue eyes was the tenderness that few ever look upon save in the eyes of young mothers when they behold first their first-born. Her countenance was enraptured with the spirit of an adoration that was beyond the understanding of mortals, and that was strong enough to defy utterly the rules and conventions of the world.

All this he saw, and it wrought the ordinarily warm feeling he had for her into the grand passion, the great flame that burns never more than once. He knew that she was his mate, his woman, just as she knew that he was her mate, her man; he put his arms around her fine shoulders, and pressed her to him with a fervor that might have frightened another woman.



"And you'll let me go, won't you?" she rejoiced.

"Let you go?" he laughed. "Why, I'd steal you and carry you off now, if you didn't want to go!"

She gave the man who was soon to be her husband a folded paper, which he thrust into an inside pocket. They hastened to the mountaineer minister's home, and were married. According to his custom, old Longley Thrash gave them his blessing, an ax, and a side of acorn-fatted, pepper-cured bacon. Wolfe gave the preacher a banknote.

Because of the hawk-eyed deputy, the couple dared not spend the night anywhere in the Wolfe's Basin country. It was only after more than four hours of brisk walking that they stopped under a giant hemlock that stood beside a dashing creek, and made a bed of boughs and the blankets they had brought.

TWO and a half days were required for the completion of their exceedingly unusual wedding journey. They were footsore and weary, and their clothing was somewhat torn, when at last they reached the heart of Doe River Wilderness.

But their eyes brightened at the sight which greeted them there. Before them lay an open and level space of half a dozen acres, which was dotted sparsely with big gray-barked, leafless beeches. In the very center of it was the source of Doe River, a small lake, or great spring, of such depth that the water was bluish-black. Wolfe and his wife went to it, their tired feet swish-swishing in the thin carpet of brown and yellow beech leaves. Had they known that it was here the iron chalice—but they couldn't know.

They threw up a temporary shelter of hemlock boughs. On the next morning, Wolfe set out alone to the eastward, and found his nearest neighbor at a distance of eight miles. This neighbor, for a consideration, agreed to go to Conradsville—which was in North Carolina and twenty-four miles away—for nails, traps, window-lights and a few other articles. Then Wolfe bought a bag of cornmeal from the man, promised to return three days later, and hurried back to his waiting and naturally anxious wife.

Just ten days from the time of their starting their little log cabin, Wolfe nailed the last split board on the roof and finished the lumpy stone-and-clay chimney. It was all very crude, of course. The two

narrow doors were made of split-oak slabs; there were but two small windows; the floor of flat stones was rough and uneven; the few pieces of furniture were home-made and unsightly. But the man and the woman who dwelled there loved each other, and were happy in spite of all there was to make them unhappy, and it was home—that dearest of all earth's places.

The days stole into the past rapidly, as joyful days always go, and the last of February came. Wolfe had searched faithfully for the treasure that the stranger of the long ago had babbled about on his deathbed, but to no avail; he had found nothing that in any way resembled gold. The trapping had been good, however, and neighbor Ivins had been accommodating, and Wolfe had succeeded in saving enough money to take him and his wife to Oregon in the spring. As for Tot—Tot was a full blown rose of a woman now, and to her husband, quite properly, the most wonderful person he had ever known.

One of the last of the winter's snows had just ceased to fall. The white blanket was nearly a foot in depth on the ground; it lay heavily upon the branches of the trees. They stood together at one of the small windows, watching the twilight shadows fall in the forest. The full moon peeped above the crest of the long, low mountain that formed the eastern horizon, and heaven's own pure white began to glisten like a field of diamonds. Over the whole scene hung a silence



so deep that Wolfe and his wife felt that they could touch it, almost, with their hands.

"So you're through with the gold hunt," Tot murmured.

Her husband nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "It seems useless to go any farther with it. If I hadn't known that gold has been found in these hills now and then for ages, I wouldn't have had the heart to stick to the search these three and a half months. When this snow is gone, if you don't mind, Tot, we'll start for Oregon."

"I don't mind, of course," Tot replied dutifully. "Whenever you think we ought

to go, we'll go. Little Buck, the stranger's treasure surely wasn't gold."

Her surmise was correct!

Wolfe suddenly leaned forward and pulled the mealbag window-curtain into place, and led his wife from the window. There was a look of mild concern on his countenance. Tot found herself in the grip of a nameless fear.

"I saw something glint in the moonlight; it was a gun barrel, I think," Wolfe said quietly. "I'll go out and investigate, and I'll let myself out by the back door; drop the bar into place after me, Tot, and don't be a bit afraid."

"Do you think it's an officer?" she whispered breathlessly.

He shook his head. "Probably not. But I'll see, anyway."

But there was the possibility that it was an officer, and Wolfe carried no weapon with him; he would run from the law, but he wouldn't fight it. He went, stooping low, the instinct of the woodsman strong within him, across the open space; as noiselessly as a shadow, he stole along the edge of the forest, going from bush to bush and from tree to tree, and crept up very near to an angular, slouching figure that was peering toward the cabin from behind a huge oak. The unknown had an old-fashioned, single-barreled muzzle-loading shotgun in his hands; it was a gun that no officer would carry, and Wolfe drew a breath of relief.

Then the fellow meant mischief. Of that there was no doubt. It angered Wolfe to see this serpent in his Garden of Eden. He crouched low, and with a spring like that of a panther landed on the back of the unknown and bore him to the snow on his face.

"What are you snooping around here for?" he demanded hotly. "Who are you, anyway?"

He tried to turn the other's face upward. The stranger was strong and wiry; he kept his countenance hidden very effectively. Wolfe rose, seized the man by his collar and jerked him to his feet.

"I'll see you, all right," he growled.

The stranger wheeled with all the quickness of a cat, and struck Wolfe in the chest, staggering him. Wolfe loosed his hold on the man's collar, and struck out hard. His fist met only the air. The unknown turned and ran through the deep snow and into the denser shadows of the woodland, leaving the shotgun lying under the oak. Wolfe followed and caught the fellow by his ragged coat; there was a tear-

ing sound, and something that jingled musically dropped to the snow.

The stranger, seeming spurred by a sudden frenzy of fear, doubled his efforts, ran into a thick copse of underbrush—and escaped.

When Little Buck Wolfe picked up the thing that had dropped with a musical jingle from inside the lining of the mysterious person's coat, he was filled with amazement. It was a canvas bag containing more than twenty-four hundred dollars in banknotes, gold and silver.

The robber who had dynamited the Unaka Lumber Company's safe on the night of the fire had just slipped through his fingers!

XXI

WOLFE groveled in the deep snow for the old-fashioned shotgun his antagonist in the struggle of a few minutes before had lost. He found the long muzzle-loader, and hastened to the cabin's front door. Tot let him in, and he told her of his little adventure. They sat down before the wood fire, and counted the money.

"If you were to catch the robber and have him arrested," Tot asked hopefully, "wouldn't it clear you o' the charge o' stealin' this money?"

"Yes, it would clear me of that. But, you see," and Wolfe frowned, "it wouldn't wipe out the charges that I am an accessory after the fact to a felony and—the other things. Whitney Fair is a hard man, Tot, and he's shrewd. He'd go to any end to make me smoke, on account of the beating I gave him. I couldn't risk going back, if that's what you're thinking about. I believe this would be our best plan:

"Tomorrow, I'll set out after the robber, and follow him by means of his track

in the snow. I'll catch him, and we'll take him over to Ivins' place. We'll instruct Ivins to keep him for ten days, and then turn him over to the sheriff at Conradsville. You

and I will steal into Conradsville, express the stolen money to Colonel Mason, and immediately afterward board a train for Asheville. In Asheville, you'll buy two fares for the Northwest, and I'll join you



on the train; this to break possible pursuit. Ivins likes us, Tot, and he won't let our man talk him into doing anything we don't want done. Eh?"

"You ought to know what's best for us, honey," Tot answered promptly. "But I'll be anxious while you're gone after the robber. You see, it's Cat-Eye Mayfield you're goin' after."

"Of course—that is, it's probable."

"And if you're not mighty careful," seriously, "you'll follow him into a trap of some kind."

Her husband laughed boyishly. "Don't you think I'm capable of matching wits with Cat-Eye Mayfield?" he said. "I'll have the advantage of being armed, you know."

Tot poked the fire before she spoke again. Wolfe noted that her now ruddy face was decidedly troubled.

"It's like fightin' a snake in the dark!" she warned. "Cat-Eye maybe hasn't got any gun; but he's got the cunnin' of a fox, and the cunnin' of an Indian, and the cunnin' of a man born to be a killer all in one. I tell you again, Little Buck, if you're not mighty careful, you'll follow him into a trap. He knows you'll try to track him down, and he'll be ready for you. Remember, that man hates you a lot more than you can ever, ever understand, Little Buck!"

Wolfe laughed at her fears, though in this instance it was she that was the wiser of the two.

"I'll be careful," he promised.

They took a flat stone from the floor next to the hearth, exposing a tiny pit beneath. The canvas bag and its burden went into the pit with their savings money, and the stone was put back into place. Then they saw that the little cabin's doors and windows were securely fastened, and retired for the night.

An hour before the coming of the next dawn found them up and busy with the preparation of breakfast. When Wolfe had eaten, he strapped a full belt of cartridges around his waist, took up his rifle and his hat and a bundle of food, kissed his wife fondly and set out on his journey. The day promised to be clear, but the wind was out of the north and stinging, biting cold.

The footprints led him in an almost straight line to the southward. The robber had deviated only that he might avoid a cliff or a dense thicket of undergrowth. It was very evident that Mayfield, if Mayfield it was, had traveled with a fair knowl-

edge of the wilderness and with some goal definitely in view from the start.

The air became even colder as the day wore on. Wolfe was forced to keep his feet moving at a lively rate, and to frequently beat his gloved hands together, to prevent frostbite. The snow now had a crust that impeded his going somewhat, and made his tramping noisy. He began to be a little nervous because of his everlasting, expectant watching ahead. Wolfe was not a man who bore suspense easily.

By the middle of the afternoon he had covered, he judged, fifteen miles. He now found himself in a perfect jungle of tall virgin timber that would have widened his eyes in admiration had the circumstances been different; it was spread over a rugged, rocky valley that few men, except for Cherokee Indians, had ever entered; the very primitiveness of it was at once both beautiful and terrible. A weird light reigned between the green of the treetops overhead and the white of the snow under foot. There was no sound except for the souging of the wind through the needles of the gaunt, spectral hemlocks.

It was in here that the man whom Wolfe had been following had made camp. A pile of coals that were still glowing marked the spot. Wolfe paused for less than two minutes to warm his hands over the remains of the unknown's fire, then struck out at a faster gait than ever along the fresher trail; and he remembered Tot's warning, and tried to keep his wits about him.

Then he was suddenly confronted by a little canyon, in the bottom of which flowed a clear and sparkling mountain stream edged with ice. The footprints of the unknown ended abruptly at the brink. He knelt and peered over. The snow on the ledges below him had not been disturbed. His man had crossed, he figured, for there was no backward track—but how?

"He didn't fly over!" muttered Wolfe to himself. "And yet——"



Ever suspecting trickery, he searched the thick woodland around him with his eyes. Everything seemed quite as it should be. Another moment, and his gaze fell upon a great wild vine that hung within arm's reach of him; it ran almost to the top of a tall hemlock, and—it had been cut at a point near the snowy ground.

"I see—" Wolfe smiled—"he swung himself across by means of this!"

It was not an unreasonable conclusion. The distance over was not more than thirty feet; the vine's first fastening was on a branch fully twenty yards above. Human destinies sometimes hinge upon the tiniest things; if Wolfe had but noted that there were no footprints on the other side of the little canyon, for instance—

He tested the vine; it held his weight with no sign whatever of giving away. He looked below, and considered; if he fell, he would be hurt: neither the snow that covered the farther half of the canyon's bottom, nor the water that covered the nearer half, would keep him from being hurt if he fell. Therefore, he tested the strength of the vine again. Again it held his weight without the least sign of breaking or tearing loose in the tree overhead.

"I should be able to do anything that the other fellow can do," he told himself.

With that, Wolfe proceeded to fasten his rifle and the bundle of food to his cartridge-belt. Then he took a firm hold on the vine, stepped fifteen steps backward, ran forward swiftly, and launched himself out over the chasm—and the vine parted high in the tree with a sharp snap. He loosed his grip on it and flung out his arms, turned completely twice in the air, and landed hard upon the ice-coated stones beside the rippling creek. A few seconds of spasmodic writhing, a faint moan, and he lay face-downward, motionless and silent.

Had he been unconscious for long, doubtless he would have frozen. Perhaps the penetrating chill helped to bring him to. He sat up dazedly, and dazedly noted that his hat, coat, rifle, cartridge-belt and rations were gone—and that there were dozens of fresh footprints, the same footprints that he had been trailing, in the snow about him.

In spite of his watchfulness, he had fallen into a trap very neatly!

Wolfe tried to get upon his feet then. A fiery streak of pain in his right leg wrung a hoarse cry of pain from him. He dragged himself to the shelter of a nearby overhanging ledge, and on the way came upon his bundle of food; it had been torn

from his belt in the fall, and the friendly snow had hidden it from the robber's eyes. He sat up on the dry earth, and hurriedly took stock of his injuries. His forehead was bruised and swollen; six inches above his right ankle there was a fractured bone.

A small heap of driftwood lay nearby. Wolfe took a knife from his pocket, whittled a few handfuls of shavings from a stick of dry heart-pine, and started a fire to keep off the bitter cold. When the wood was burning well, he tied a handkerchief about his throbbing head, removed his right boot and ripped the trousers-leg to the knee, and bound his injured limb in a set of crude splints. The pain of the fracture was now as much as he could bear without shrieking.

He stretched himself out on his left side, with his back to the rock wall. Suddenly he realized that he was staring at the smaller end of the wild vine. It had been smoothly cut; his man had been waiting for him in the top of the hemlock that had supported it.

"Of course, that was it!" nodded Wolfe, with a bitter little smile. "I—I might have known."

Perhaps the robber, thinking him done for, had gone away for good. Then he would put out the fire, that the smoke from it might not reveal the fact that he was still alive. Anyway, he must begin dragging himself homeward. If Tot became so uneasy that she followed him, and something happened to her—the thought made Little Buck Wolfe's face as hard as a mask of marble.

But his precaution was for nothing. A pair of opaque, uncanny black eyes watched him toss the burning wood to the snow. He chanced to look toward the hemlock above; he saw Cat-Eye Mayfield standing with one lean shoulder touching the body of the tree. Mayfield wore Wolfe's coat and hat over his own coat and hat; around his slender waist was Wolfe's cartridge-belt, and in his hands was Wolfe's repeater.

The two men glared at each other for a full minute without speaking. Mayfield was proud of his cunning; his villainous triumph was written over his narrow, dark face and in his lustreless eyes. Wolfe was defiant, and so full of rage that every nerve and fibre of him trembled; the veins in his temples stood out and throbbed violently.

"Well?" snapped Wolfe.

"Haw-haw-haw!" laughed Mayfield. "Howdy, and hello! A-judgin' from the way ye've got that 'ar leg o' yore'n fixed up, Little Buck, I'd say ye'd missed yore

callin'. Ye'd ort to be a doctor, shorely! Ye could git plenty o' cases o' bots and pip, anyhow—haw-haw-haw!"

Wolfe set his teeth together, and refused to reply. Mayfield became demoniacally sober, and asked abruptly, "How'd ye like to be shot?"

There was certainly no levity anywhere in the question. Wolfe knew very well that he was facing the open jaws of death, knew that his life depended entirely on Mayfield's whim. Mayfield had little to fear. A man's bones might lie there in that wilderness, bleaching and bare, for



years upon years before they were found. As for Tot—the man beside the hemlock figured that he could very easily take care of Tot!

"Have ye got a ny pa'tickler choice about jest whar ye'd ruther be shot?" he inquired with tantalizing calmness.

The man below forced himself to speak steadily: "There's no other way out? You're determined to top it all off with murder; eh?"

"Shorely." Mayfield's opaque eyes narrowed wickedly. "Shorely. I've lived my whole life to git to this one minute. Ef ye wants to say yore little 'Now I Lay Me,' git at it!"

Wolfe shuddered in spite of himself, though he bravely kept the other from seeing it. Death seemed inevitable. If he must go the long, long way, he would go as nearly without pain as he might; besides, he believed that a bold front would go farther than anything else toward saving him—and the wretch should not have the satisfaction of even suspecting that he was afraid.

"Harm Tot, if you dare—and if a man can rise from his grave I'll rise from mine," he said quietly. "Let's see whether you can hit my fingernail, Cat-Eye."

He put the tip of his right forefinger squarely on the center of his badly-bruised forehead. His hot mountaineer blood was thrumming in his ears now.

"Hold it thar!" said Mayfield.

Wolfe held it there. Mayfield drew

back the rifle's hammer, and began to take aim without a rest; he was a good enough marksman for that. Wolfe watched Mayfield as though there was something about the villain that fascinated him. A minute passed, an eternity in sixty seconds, and then a spirit of terror seized the man below. The suspense bore down upon him with a weight that was smothering. He felt that he must cry out to Mayfield and implore him to put an end to it. But he kept his lips resolutely closed, and his gaze remained riveted unflinchingly upon the unwinking black eye beyond the sights of his own repeater.

"Huh!" Mayfield grunted suddenly.

There is no doubt that Wolfe's quite terrible gaze had something to do with it—Cat-Eye Mayfield lowered the rifle, and shrugged his narrow shoulders oddly.

"Huh!" he grunted again. "It wouldn't last nigh long enough to suit me, Little Buck."

The pain in Wolfe's injured limb was greater than ever in that moment, but he kept from wincing, for he knew that the other would certainly regard it as an exhibition of fright.

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"Jest what I said; nothin' more, and nothin' less. I'm purty shore I can fix up somethin' 'at'll beat killin' ye this a-way. Yeh, I'm purty dang shore I can."

"Probably," nodded Wolfe.

"Ye see," Mayfield went on devilishly, "I might hatch up some way to seprate you and Tot, or somethin' like that, ye know. Well, I reckon ye hain't never heerd what happened to yore pap and his outfit atter you and Tot left the basin, have ye? Ef ye hain't, I'll find big pleasure in a-bein' the one to tell ye. Hey?"

"What happened to them?"

"Well," and Mayfield caught the repeater into the hollow of an arm and began to chafe his cold hands, "well, Deputy Cartwright he ketched yore pap on his knees clost to his moonshine still, which same he'd done tore all to pieces, a-prayin' to beat hell. Cartwright he took off his hat and waited untel Old Buck was through, when he chased Old Buck back to his cave whar lie'd been a-hidin' at; and fin'ly Cartwright he ketched yore pap and took him down to the jail at Johnsville. How's that fo' news, Little Buck; hey?"

"It's news, all right," growled Wolfe. "Anything else?"

"Shorely!" grinned Mayfield. "Well, atter he had Old Buck all tight in jail, Cartwright—he's a reg'lar heller!—he

watched the Wolfe wimmen; and when they went to their menfolks over in the Balsam Cone section, he follored 'em. And 'en Cartwright he went back to Johnsville and got up a big posse, and went back and ketched every one o' the rest o' the clan. How's that fo' news?"

Wolfe had gone ashen. He believed, somehow, that Mayfield had told him the truth. And Mayfield really had.

"The whole outfit of 'em had a trial," the man beside the hemlock went on eagerly, "and they was all sent up to the State prison at Nashville fo' five year!"

That, also, was truth. Violently-suffering Little Buck Wolfe bent his head in gratitude for the silver lining to the cloud; five years was not half the sentence usually meted out for the crime of arson. A beautifully bright spot, too, was the turning of his iron father.

"I reckon you're a-wonderin' why I hain't never caused you to be ketched by the law, hain't ye?"

Mayfield's voice jarred. Wolfe shook his head.

"Not a bit, Cat-Eye. You're wanted, too, and you've no great wish to get anywhere near the authorities."

The man above eyed the man below peculiarly for a moment. Then the man above drawled, "Little Buck, you talk like a book. You look like a book. And you act like a book!"

Wolfe jumped as though he had been struck. His wife had told him that word for word one cold evening when they sat at their fireside; but she had said it admiringly, for she knew it was because he had,

as it were, lived on a diet of books for eight years, so hungry had he been for education.

He knew that Cat-Eye Mayfield had caved-dropped at their cabin!

"I didn't tell anybody whar ye was at," said Mayfield. "acause I had more ag'in ye 'an the law's got. Little Buck," and the lustreless eyes had never seemed so diabolical as now, "I've hated you all o' my life. I've hated ye so long and so much 'at I'm all hate; from the crown o' my head to the sole o' my feet, I'll hate fo' you. Every dawg has his day, ye know. You've done had yore'n. Now I'm a-goin' to have mine.

I'm a-goin' to make you wisht ye'd never been borned. I'm a-goin' to make ye wisht ye could die!"

Wolfe gave him a silent, unflinching stare. Mayfield continued.

"I hain't got it all planned out yit. But I think I can promise ye one thing faith'ly; you hain't never a-goin to set yore two eyes on Tot Singleton any more."

"You cut-throat!" cried Wolfe.

"And," Mayfield grinned suddenly, "I plum' mighty nigh it fo'got to tell ye this here:

"Ye know a half a gallon o' licker and a half a gallon o' water makes a whole gallon o' licker, when a little tobacker or lye is put in it to stouten it up, don't ye? And it's considered a lowdown trick, as ye also know. Well, a long time ago, yore pap he sent me up to Alex Singleton's atter a gallon o' cawn-lightnin' when his still-worm had friz and bu'sted; and I swiped half o' the licker, and added water an a big leaf o' tobacker to make out. So when yore pap he found the tobacker in the jug, he went straight ater old Alex, which was the startin' o' the fightin' atwixt the Wolfes and Singletons. Some more news, hain't it? Haw—haw—haw! Well, I guess ye can make it to the lake in about three days o' good, hard crawlin' like a lizard. So long to ye, and bad luck!"

He disappeared. The sounds of his footsteps died away quickly, and there was silence save for the rippling of the creek and the souging of the wind among the needles of the hemlocks.

Wolfe's heart was torn afresh with fears for Tot's safety. Mayfield possessed more cunning than he had been willing to believe; the plot, whatever it was, would be as black as the Pit and, probably, successful. Spurred to the highest degree of desperation, Wolfe stuffed his package of rations inside his shirt, and took a crude crutch from the pile of driftwood; then he began to make his way slowly and painfully down the stream. He soon came upon a rotting tree trunk lying across the creek, and by means of this he went to the other side of the canyon's bottom and to the base of a series of ledges that promised escape.

Twenty minutes later, he was crawling determinedly along the path that his feet and Mayfield's had made in the snow.

That journey through the frozen forest was difficult and terrible. He was forced to halt occasionally to rest himself, and always he built a little fire that he might not take cold while his overworked and trem-



bling muscles were relaxed. He labored on all that night and all the next day, without stopping more than half an hour at a time. When there were yet five miles between him and the great spring that Tot had named "The Lake of Peace," he became utterly exhausted; the physical machine that was him was fine, but it had reached the limit of its endurance.

Since it was not humanly possible for him to go farther without rest and sleep, he made a fire in a sheltered spot and put on wood that would last for hours. This done, he fashioned himself a thin couch of laurel branches, collapsed upon it, and at once was wrapped in a slumber so deep that it was akin to death itself. But vague dreams tormented him when the first keen edge of his exhaustion was worn off; he heard Tot calling to him again and again, and he awoke in a fever of anxiety while it was yet night. He sat up stiffly. He had to go!

When he had eaten the last of the food that his wife had prepared for him, he took up his brushwood crutch and set out to the northward once more. He strove hard to make himself believe that Tot had been neither outwitted nor deceived by the foxlike and dastardly Mayfield. But the fear would not be driven away.

The middle of the afternoon had come when at last he reached the open space that lay around the head of Doe River. His heart ached with apprehension because Tot did not come out to meet him. He opened his lips to call and couldn't speak her name. Fear had made him dumb.

XXII

WOLFE crumpled on the icy doorstep. With the palm of one of his half frozen hands he beat against the door. The only answer he had was the dull rattle of the wooden latch. He struggled upward, seized the coonhide latch-string, and gave it a nervous jerk. The door creaked slowly inward. There was no person in the cabin. Wolfe entered on his hands and knees, reached a crude chair beside the hearth, and drew himself into it with difficulty.

A fire burned brightly in the wide stone fireplace, and in a corner of the room lay a little heap of wood with particles of snow still clinging to it; the cabin had not long been deserted, certainly. After he had rested for a few minutes, Wolfe went first to the door at the rear and then to the door at the front, and looked for his wife's footprints in the snow outside. He recog-

nized only the footprints of Cat-Eye Mayfield and himself.

More anxious than ever, he leaned weakly against the jamb, put his cupped hands to his mouth, and shouted.



"Tot! Tot!"

The rock-bound hills sent her name back to him in echoes that were worse than maddening.

"Tot!" he called again; and again came the echo, Tot!

Once more he called, and this time the voice that floated back to him was a little broken. He felt that he was about to fall. He crept dizzily to his chair, pushed it closer to the fire and climbed into it, and put out his hands and feet to warm them.

As the cold's numbness left him, his mind became clearer. He began to look about him. Tot's spare clothing lay nicely folded on a shelf beside his own, as usual. Tot's rifle was not in its place over the smoked log mantel. Every cent of their savings and the other money was gone. The bed was rumpled badly on one side. A few scattered bits of food and an unwashed frying-pan on the rough dining-table gave it a distinctly untidy appearance. These tokens offered Wolfe scant reason to hope that his wife was safe. All manner of fearful possibilities came to torture his already over-wrought brain. Perhaps—

His thoughts were broken into rudely by the sounds of masculine footsteps in the crusty snow beyond the doorstep. A rasping voice began to sing a snatch of foolish song:

"Sally she had a dream last night;

It was a pow'ful-droll one.

She dremp' she had a petticoat

Made o' her mammy's old one!"

Wolfe switched his gaze toward the open doorway. Cat-Eye Mayfield entered and stamped the snow from his run-over cowhide boots noisily. In one hand he carried the rusty, old-fashioned, muzzle-

loading shotgun that he had lost a few evenings before.

"And so ye got back, did ye?" he said hoarsely; he was suffering from a severe cold in his throat. "I told ye it wouldn't take more'n three days o' good, hard crawl-in' like a lizard, didn't I?"

"Where's my wife?" Wolfe demanded.

Mayfield laughed gratingly. It was not forced. Wolfe's anxiety delighted him. He dropped into the other homemade chair and trained the shotgun across his lap, straight at Wolfe's face.

"Where's my wife?"

"Now you jest be keeful 'at ye don't start somethin' 'at ye can't stop," Mayfield warned, at the same time thumbing back the old muzzle-loader's hammer. It was a clumsy thing. "I'll tell ye whar yore wife is at, Little Buck, in my own good time, and not a minute afore; please git that, will ye?"

"I reckon," he went on forthwith, "you're a-wonderin' what I've done about the rifles and the money, hain't ye? Well, I broke Tot's rifle, and throwed it in the lake; I hid yore rifle whar I hid the money. This here old shotgun is all the weapon I want fo' you. I hain't a-wantin' to kill ye. It would end yore mis'ry too soon. I want ye to suffer a long time, and I'm a-goin' to make ye suffer a long time! The' hain't nary grain o' lead in this here old gun. The' hain't nothin' but powder—six loads o' powder, all tamped in tight w' clay. You couldn't never guess what I'm a-goin' to do with it, so I'll tell ye.

"I'm a-goin' to shoot ye in the face w' powder, and black it fo' good jest like a nigger's, and put yore eyes out—atter I've told ye what I've got to tell ye. Fust off, you're a-goin' to spend the rest o' yore days a-wanderin' in Doe River Wilderness as blind as a bat, a-eatin' leaves and grass and roots—keeful ther, Little Buck Wolfe, or I'll shoot right now!"

His voice rang with hatred and—insanity! But Wolfe was in no condition to take note of the latter. Wolfe was sitting up straight, his eyes glittering, his hands gripping the sides of his homemade chair as though they would crush the wooden splints. For a moment he seemed about to defy the threatening shotgun and attack its owner in spite of his badly injured leg.

But the wicked eagerness he saw in Mayfield's lean face caused him to relax. He did not doubt that Mayfield would pull the trigger at the slightest provocation. It would be best to wait. If he waited, there might be a chance—

"Tell me about Tot," he said unsteadily. "And if you've harmed her, Cat-Eye—"

"Now don't go so dang fast," broke in Mayfield, crossing his lanky legs without in the least spoiling the shotgun's aim. "I hain't even laid the weight o' my little finger on Tot. I shorely hain't. I managed my revenge another way. It was right cute, too! Well, here's the whole thing. Little Buck; and ef ye tries to git at me whilst I'm a-tellin' it, I'll shoot—and when I shoot, black goes yore face and out goes yore eyes. I hopes ye onderstand me.

"All right," he ran on, enjoying every moment of it. "When I got here, it was sev'ral hours atter night, and the moon it was a-shinin' as bright as day. The' was a light in the cabin window here—to show you the way home, I reckon. I hides myself ahind of a tree, and watches fo' a little while. Tot she'd come to the door

every few minutes, and look out. Oncet she must ha' imagined she'd heerd you a-comin', acause she runs out in the woods a-callin' you.

"Little Buck, whar are you at, honey?" she says. "Do come on, honey; you must be half froze," she says, jest the same as ef you was a kid! Bah!



"But the only answer she got was none. So she goes back in the house here, whar she sets down and cries, jest like wimmen will, ye know—now you be keeful thar, Little Buck. You can see, shorely, I'm mighty nigh it a-dyin' to shoot.

"Well," he continued, "I done already had everything planned out to a fare-you-well finish afore I got here. I took yore rifle down to the aidge o' the lake thar at the big beech, and laid it down half in the water and half out. I throwed yore hat out in the lake, and it floated jest like I'd figgered it would float. I doubles up yore coat, and puts it inside o' my shirt. I hides yore ca'tridge-belt in a clump o' laurel. Then I picks up a great, big rock from the lake's bank and holds it up above my head in both hands, and waits fo' a lull in the wind.

"When the wind it had lulled a little I threw the big rock out in the lake. It made a pow'ful noisy splash jest like I'd wanted it to do. And 'en I commenced a-bellerin' as loud as I could beller and not bust a lung wide open.

"Swim Little Buck swim! Kick wi' yore feet and paddle wi' yore hands! Swim! Swim! I bellers. 'It's pow'ful deep and ef ye don't swim,' I bellers, 'you're shore to drown!'

"And 'en I kicked in the water wi' one foot, and bellered a little more.

"Well, Tot she comes jest a-flyin' from the cabin here, which was edactly what I'd looked fo' her to do. What makes some wimmen so dang foolish about one man when the world's full o' menfolks was allus more'n I could understand. And in the bright moonlight I could see 'at her face was as white or whiter'n the snow onder her feet. Her hands they was both stretched out in front o' her.

"'Little Buck,' she says, bad skeered, 'whar are you at, honey—whar are you at?' says she.

"I goes to meet her, o' course. And I acted as ef I was shore turrible bad excited.

"'He fell in the lake!' I tells her. 'He slipped and fell in the lake! Le's git a rope, or a long pole, and mebbe we can git him out afore he's drowned!' Haw—haw—haw!

"I had—keerful, Little Buck; you cain't shp on me!—had already spotted a pole. I picks it up and runs back to the big beech, and holds it out over the water.

"'Ketch a-holt o' this here, Little Buck!' I squalls. 'Ketch a holt o' this here!' Then I stoops and looks out over the black lake. 'He's done went down,' I says to Tot, who was a-standin' aside o' me a-wingin' her hands. 'Pore boy; I cain't see nothin' but his hat a-floatin' out thar,' I says.

"'And you pushed him in, you brute!' says Tot, all a-sobbin'. 'Go in and try to git him out, Cat-Eye!' she says.

"'I didn't push him in,' says I; 'but I'll do all I can to git him out. It may gi' me my death o' cold,' I says, 'but I wouldn't mind anything fo' yore sake, little gyurl!'

"'Keerful thar—

"And wi' that, I yanks off my old ragged coat and throws it and my old ragged hat to the snow, and dives right in head-foremos'. The water it wasn't so awful cold, it a-bein' nothin' but a monst'ous big spring—springs is allus cold in the summer and warm in winter, y' know—but it made me hoarse in my talk, as ye've done noticed, I reckon. I've been a-doctorin'

my throat the best I could; but I'm still hoarse—"

"Never mind stretching it out like that!" Wolfe interrupted angrily. "Go on with it!"

Mayfield grinned a broad, evil grin. He was enjoying to the fullest his hour of triumph.

"Why," he leered, "you're danged anxious to have it over with and git yore face burnt black and yore eyes burnt out, hain't ye?"

"All right; as I said, I dived into the lake and found 'at the water wasn't so cold atter all. I paddled and kicked ontel I'd worked my way deep down in the lake. Thar I took yore coat out from the inside o' my shirt, ketched it by the bottom, and let myself come back to the top o' the water. The minute my head pops up into the wind, it mighty nigh freezes off, o' course. How I spluttered and puffed and blowed! Tot was a-standin' on the bank onder the beech; she was a-leanin' out toward me.

"'Did ye find him?' she says, anxious-like. 'Did ye find Little Buck fo' me? Oh,' she says, 'don't ye dare to tell me you



never found him, Cat-Eye!

"I swims to Tot, and reaches yore coat up to her.

"'He'd lodged ag'in a rock ledge down thar,' I tells her, wi' my teeth a-chatterin' from the cold wind. 'I ketched him by the bottom o' the coat; but he slipped out of it, and rolled off o' the rock ledge, and sunk on down, hundreds o' feet in 'at black hole! He's gone, pore little gyurl,' I says. 'He's gone forever. What a pity it was he couldn't swim!' I says.

"And Tot she stands thar a-starin' at me wi' them 'ar big, fine, purty blue eyes o' her'n filled wi' the tarment o' hell itself. I'll own up 'at I did feel jest a bit mean over what I was a-doin'—you ta' keer, or I'll pull the trigger and put out yore blasted eyes! Don't you make nary 'nother move like as ef ye was a-goin' to jump at me, neither; do ye understand me?"

"Well, I crawls a-drippin' out in that turrible cold wind, and says to Tot, 'As

I'm jest about to freeze to death,' says I, 'I reckon I'd better run to the fire.'

"Git his nat fo' me," begs Tot.

"I jumps in the lake and brings her yore hat. She wanted to know ef I'd done every blessed thing I could do to save ye, and I swore I shorely had. I went to the house, and stirred up the fire, and stood afore it, a-turnin' fust one side to it and 'en t'other. Tot she didn't foller me to the house. I watched her through a window. She stood out thar in the awful cold, wi' yore wet coat and hat pressed to her bosom, fo' two solid hours afore she moved a single inch.

"And I says to myself, I says, 'Mebbe I hain't a-gittin' even and square wi' you fo' a-turnin' me down and a-takin' that 'ar light-headed article you took fo' a husband! Mebbe I hain't a-gittin' even and square wi' you!' I says to myself. I——"

"You yellow-hearted scoundrel!" Wolfe exploded.

"Ta' keer! Ta' keer!" Mayfield cautioned. "You hain't in no p'sition to be, a-callin' me ugly names. I never did like to be called ugly names, and I hain't a-goin' to put up with it."

Wolfe sank back in his chair. "All right," he said, "get the rest of it out of you."

"Well," the other pursued, "I knowed wimmen was scatter-brained and foolish when they was in love. I know the wimmenfolks and their ways, y' see. I'd figured it out 'at Tot she would drown herself to be wi' you in death. Wimmen's awful crazy when they're in love. And 'specially these here mountain wimmen. You know how they loves when they loves at all. So as I watched Tot through the window, I shorely expected to see her jump in the lake and go down. But she didn't. She fin'ly come to the house and set down afore the fire. Yore coat and hat was still in her arms, and they was froze stiff now—yore coat and hat was. Her face it was all pinched and blue wi' the cold.

"When she'd warmed up a little, she says to me, 'Tell me how it happened.'

"'It was this a-way,' says I. 'Little Buck he follered me over to a creek, and ketcht me thar. He was a-bringin' me in, and we was a-walkin' along aside o' the lake, and his foot slipped on the ice. You know all o' the rest,' I says.

"'You pushed him in, you brute!' she says to me. 'You pushed him in, you brute!'

"'That's pow'ful foolish talk, little gyurl,' says I. 'You hain't got no right to

'cuse me o' sech a thing, atter I resked my life a-tryin' to git him out. It makes me feel plum' bad,' I says.

"But she stuck to it 'at I was the cause o' yore death, and all the argyfyin' I could do didn't change her notions a dang bit. And fin'ly I tells her this here:

"'Have it yore way, like wimmenfolks allus does,' I says. 'You can shoot me ef ye want to. I promise ye I won't raise a hand to keep ye from it.' I was jest a-bluffin', ye understand.

"'The only reason I hain't already shot



ye,' Tot says, 'is 'at I'm afeard blood on my soul, even the blood of a rattlesnake like you, might keep me from a-goin' to Little Buck when I die. Even the blood of a snake is red,' says she.

"And I won't never fo'git how she looked when she told me that. Ef it hadn't ha' been fo' my hate fo' you, Little Buck Wolfe, I'd ha' quit right thar, shorely.

"Well, I laid down on the floor afore the fire, and soon drapped off to sleep. When I woke up, daylight was a-breakin'. Tot she was still a-settin' thar a-holdin' yore wet clo'es to her bosom. Her breath it was a-comin' wheezy and quick, and she had a scratchy sawt o' cough; her eyes they was as bright as coals o' fire, and her face was a-burnin' wi' fever.

"'You contemptible devil!' cried Wolfe, every nerve in his body at taut as a violin string.

"'Keerful now!' said Mayfield, his finger feeling for the trigger. "You hain't in any p'sition to be a-callin' me ugly names."

Wolfe quieted himself by a supreme effort. "Tell the rest," he urged.

It was all very plausible, just the thing, in fact, for Mayfield to do. Therefore, it did not occur to Wolfe that the wretch had lied to him—and the wretch hadn't.

"The' hain't a dang bit o' use in a-bein' so allfired fidgety," said Mayfield. "I'll git to the p'int in my own good time. I'm a-holdin' it off a purpose to see you wriggle. It's the biggest kind o' fun to me, to see you wriggle like a worm in hot ashes.

"All right. Well, as soon as it was broad daylight, Tot she gits up and goes out to the bank o' the lake whar she thought you'd went in at. I watched her through

the window. I seed her stoop down clost to the water and pick up yore rifle, which I'd laid thar to fool her. She made shore it was yore'n, and took it to her bosom wi' yore coat and hat. After a little while o' standin' thar a-starin' down into the lake, she comes back to the house. She was a-staggerin' now; she was as wild as a rabbit in her head, jest plum' delirrus, and she commenced a-talkin' to you.

"'Little Buck,' she says, 'whar are you at, honey? I want you now,' she says. 'Why don't you answer me, Little Buck? Whar are you at? Why don't you come to me? Why don't you come to yore Tot?' she says; and she sobs a little at the last.

"And I knowed as I listened to her a-talkin' that a-way 'at my big vict'ry was at hand. Then I heerd her say, reel soft, this here:

"'I remember—I remember, now. How lonesome you must be down in that black hole without me!' she says—ta' keer thar, Little Buck Wolfe, ta' keer!

"Tot she goes to the table and puts down yore rifle, hat and coat. She takes a little Bible-book from the mantel, and puts it in her bosom. I watches her clost. She went out to the big beech aside o' the lake. I follered her, a-keepin' whar she wouldn't notice me. She turned her burnin' eyes uppard, and raised both arms. I seed the light o' the risin' sun sparkle on the di'mont o' the ring 'at was on her finger. Her copper-colored hair it looked like gold. I bit the inside o' my mouth ontel it bled, acause I was somehow afeard.

"'I'm a-comin' to ye, honey,' she says delirruslike. 'It's better to lay down thar in that eternal night wi' you 'an to live on in this lonesome, lonesome world. Open yore arms f o' me, Little Buck,' says she, 'like ye used to—'I'm a-comin' to be wi' you, my own!' she says.

"And she walked straight down in the water and went onder; and the last I seed o' her was one little, white hand—"

"One little, white hand—"

Wolfe interrupted in a terrible voice. He

could govern himself no longer—he straightened on his sound leg and sprang, his hands before his eyes to protect them from the powder. There was an oath from the lips of Mayfield, and immediately afterward came a great flash and a great roar. Wolfe found himself groping in a stifling white cloud of powder smoke—but he had not been burned in the least degree!

He dropped to his hands and knees and peered under the slowly-lifting cloud. He saw Cat-Eye Mayfield lying supine on the floor, with the old shotgun across his narrow chest. He crept forward, meaning to kill the unspeakable reptile with his bare hands—meaning to strangle the wicked life out.

When he reached Mayfield, he saw that the shotgun, which had been loaded beyond its power of resistance, had split for eight inches at the breech—and Mayfield's lean face was burned as black as that of an Ethiopian; his eyes were perfectly and incurably blind! The monster of his own foul brain's creation had turned upon him.

Wolfe uttered a cry that makes the finest description puny. He seized the other's slender throat in a viselike grip. The blind eyes stared toward him. Then he recalled the words of Tot.

"Even the blood of a snake is red."

His hands left Mayfield's neck. He rose and limped out of the cabin, and went to the big beech that stood beside Tot's beautiful Lake of Peace. There he saw many of his wife's small footprints in the snow—

Lying in the edge of the water, he found a dark blue shawl that she had been wont to wear about her shoulders when the weather was cold. Beside it lay a tortoise-shell comb. A branch that hung low over the lake had kept for him a few strands of hair that was of the color of dark copper. He wrung the water from the shawl and put it, with the other little treasures, on the snow beside him. Almost he wished, now, that he had killed Mayfield—

A sudden weird, skittering shriek split the air like a knife. He turned his head quickly. Through the mist of his sorrow he saw blind Cat-Eye Mayfield rushing toward the lake. Mayfield's thin lips were parted and jerking; his blackened face was contorted and hideous. No man may be himself when he has suffered as young Wolfe had suffered; Wolfe laughed thickly, oddly, mimicking the hoarse laugh that was Mayfield's.

"Haw-haw-haw!"



The sightless man fell to his hands and knees and began to grope for the edge of the lake. Soon he had found it. Then he straightened and turned his hideous face—a singular thing, and inexplicable—as squarely toward Little Buck Wolfe as though he had eyes to see him.

"I'm a-goin' to give up what the' is left o' me to make you suffer more!" Mayfield gibbered. "I'm a-goin' to lay down thar in 'at black hole wi' her—wi' Tot Singleton—I'm a-goin' to be buried in the same grave wi' her, yore wife, and he'p yerself ef ye can!"

Yes, the man was insane. Hatred had absorbed all his faculties.

Wolfe stood like a work in bronze, and stared. Mayfield ran into the water, cursing as he went, and sank like a stone, down, down, down to darkness eternal. Wolfe even went whiter as he watched the bubbles and lessening ripples that marked the spot where the worst man in the world had died that his devilish triumph might be a little greater.

His lips moved, and it was to say this, brokenly, "My cup—of bitterness—is brimming. Why, my God, why?"

He made his way back to the lonesome cabin. He threw the burst shotgun out to the snow, which hid it mercifully, and tossed Mayfield's slouch hat into the fire.

There was a little of sweet, sad comfort in handling the things that had been his wife's. When he could no longer bear to look upon them, he pushed a chair to the cabin's front doorway and sat down, unmindful of the cold, and absently watched the chilled sun sink behind the snowy forest.

A great silence was about him. There was not even a wind to sigh in the tops of the giant hemlocks. It was quite as though he were the sole inhabitant of some lost, dead world.

XXIII

WHEN darkness had fallen, Wolfe closed the door and went to the low-burned fire.

He slept none that night, none the following day, and became pitifully thin and haggard. Loss of sleep and grief's steady gnawing had made him half-delirious. Hallucinations began to distress him. A dozen times he imagined he heard Tot's voice calling to him from the bluish-black depths of the lake. He imagined that he saw her ghost-white hand thrust above the water, and that it beckoned to him. Then

came Mayfield's triumphant, taunting laugh, and he saw the lusterless blind eyes staring at him through a window—

"I must put an end to this," he told himself in a whisper, when night had come again. "I'll go to bed, and I'll go to sleep. Tomorrow I'll hunt for the money and my rifle. When I'm able to walk, I'll go to Conradsville, and from there on—on."

He went to bed and he went to sleep. When he woke the next morning, he felt stronger, though his grief was as poignant as it had ever been. He determined that he would bear his burden bravely; Tot would want him to do that, is she could know.

Seven hours he spent in a search for the money and his rifle, and found neither. Mayfield, he told himself, might have carried the money to the bottom of the lake with him.

Thirty very long days went by. Winter had passed, and the first breath of spring had come. Puccoons and pale-green ferns were beginning to peep from the rich black earth in sheltered spots. The buds of the hickories were swelling, and squirrels were rioting among them.

"Tomorrow I'll go," said Wolfe to himself. "I'll start early. With the help of a cane, I can walk pretty well."

It was during the last of the sunset hour. He sat in a chair just inside the front doorway, watching the dull-gold sun without seeing it as it burned a hole through the fringe of jackpines that grew along the crest of the western mountain. Then he bent his head to his breast and began to think. He knew that the hardest good-by of his life was at hand.

A little red ant that lived under the doorstep crawled up Wolfe's boot, up his leg, and to the back of his hand. Wolfe frowned, jerked up his head, brushed the insect away, and began to stare toward the sinking dull-gold sun again.

Thanks to the little red ant, he saw a flicker of officer-blue in the distance!

A fever of fear seized him. How relentless Whitney Fair was! Of course, Fair had sent this man after him—of course! He rose so abruptly that he overturned his chair, caught up a cane and a bundle that contained provisions, his spare clothing and the clothing that Tot, his wife, had left—he would never part with that, never—and rushed out by way of the back door. As rapidly as he could go he crossed the open space and entered the eastern half of Doe River Wilderness. At the edge of the thick forest, he paused

long enough to fling out a hand toward the lake in farewell.

When he had reached the crest of a ridge half a mile from the lake, he looked back. The man in officer-blue was entering the cabin by the front doorway.



Wolfe hurried on breathlessly, going straight toward Virginia. He walked nearly all of that night, guiding his movements by the stars, and slept the next day hidden in a dense thicket of

laurel and ivy. Not until he had placed forty rugged, hard-won miles between him and the head of Doe River, did he dare to travel in the daytime. His debt to the law must wait—until his debt to man was paid!

In an extremely wild section just across the Tennessee-Virginia State line, he ran upon a logging-camp that was sorely in need of a woods foreman. He decided that there was small chance of his being apprehended in this out-of-the-way place, so he asked for the job for one month and got it.

The pay was good, and in the four weeks he saved enough money to defray all expenses of the journey to the Northwest. Then he hastened to the nearest railway station, bought a fare, and caught a west-bound train.

XXIV

THE Wolfes had been in the State's prison at Nashville a little more than four years. They now stood convinced that they had erred, that they had wilfully violated a law that was absolutely just, and they were atoning like men. There was about them none of the grimness, none of the moroseness, none of the sullen bitterness that is usually found in the hillman when he has had iron bars and walls of stone placed between him and his liberty. If they pined for home and the great dim-blue mountains with their trees and rocks and sparkling streams, there was certainly no outward sign of it.

Only one of them had felt the cold touch of the white plague, the scourge that so frequently cuts short the life of the imprisoned mountaineer. This was Brian Wolfe's son, Charley, who was not much more than a boy for all of his six feet in height. But Charley didn't whine about it; to have whined about it, to him, would have been the part of a yellow dog. In point of fact, Charley Wolfe kept his afflictions so well hidden that no one else even suspected it.

It was pitiful how he did that. In the daytime he staved off the tell-tale cough by means of a force of will that was truly remarkable; at night he buried his head in the folds of his blankets and smothered the cough. He laughed lightly at his increasing thinness and at the hectic flush that glowed in his cheeks in the afternoons—when anybody chanced to mention it.

Christmas Day came snowy and cold, with a biting north wind. The spirit of peace and good-will had found its way through the high and forbidding stone walls of the penitentiary. The convicts were not kept in their cells, nor were they made to work, on this day. Even Bully McCrary, who had been an incorrigible and the fighting man of the prison before the coming of the Wolfes, cried "Merry Christmas!" to every person he met—which included his former sworn enemy, a sad-eyed, intelligent fellow nicknamed and named Pale Tom Ledworth.

Now it was customary for the Fiddling Governor, Tennessee's best loved man, to give the inmates of the State's prison a fine dinner on Christmas Day; and on this occasion, he had decided that he would drive out to say grace over it himself.

He arrived half an hour before noon-time. The warden met him at the office door, bowed almost reverently, for the Governor was a man whose faults were so magnificently human that they were almost virtues, and greeted him with the compliments of the season. He entered, drew off his overcoat and gloves, and sat down before the glowing stove.

Just then Old Buck Wolfe, an iron gray giant whom stripes seemed altogether unable to disgrace, appeared before the door of heavy iron-lattice that stood between the office and the prison proper. His range of vision did not take in the distinguished visitor.

"Warden," said he, "will you please see if you can't get a fiddle for me—just for this one afternoon, sir? I used to fiddle.

I don't think I've forgot how. If it's not asking too much, that is."

The warden looked toward his caller.

"It's Christmas Day, Warden," the Governor said. "Get one if you can. I think I can understand how a fiddler feels when he hasn't touched a fiddle for several years. Who is it, Warden?"

"The chief of the Wolfes, sir."

At that the Governor rose, went to a desk, sat down beside it and reached for a telephone receiver. He asked for his residence, got the connection, and ordered that his own fiddle be sent at once to the penitentiary!

Old Buck Wolfe turned away the gladdest and proudest man in the sovereign State of Tennessee.

When he had gone, the Governor asked of the warden, "How are these mountaineers behaving now?"

"Men couldn't conduct themselves better than our mountaineers, sir," the warden answered. "They've done finely, all of them. The old man had a fight soon after his arrival here, but we couldn't blame him for it; he was very much in the right, sir. I'd be glad to tell you about that fight."

"I'd be glad to hear about it, Warden."

"The Wolfes," the prison official began, "had just finished putting on their first stripes when the supper gong rang. We marched them to a table that was all taken up on one side by Bully McCrary and his following. They had always made trouble among the other prisoners, the McCraryites had, and we kept them to themselves when it was convenient.

"Old Buck talked in mountaineer dialect then—Pale Tom Ledworth has since taught the Wolfes how to read and write and speak correctly, as well as a great many other things; oh, they've made the best of their prison term! Well, as I was saying—Old Buck looked across the table, straight at McCrary, drew his shaggy brows, and drawled this:

"'You fellers over thar bend yore heads down'ards a little. I am now a-goin' to ax the blessin'. The' hain't no use in a-bein' damned hawgs jest cause we happens to be here in the penitency.'

"McCrary and his outfit roared with laughter, and began to make sport of Old Buck Wolfe. Old Buck's eyes flashed like the fire of powder. He turned to his kinsmen and said, 'See 'at not more'n five o' them weasels over thar jumps on me at oncet.'

"Then he went straight across the table

and its dishes, and collared McCrary; and before the guards could stop the fight, Mc-



Crary had received a mighty good pounding. I—I guess the guards were not in much of a hurry to interfere, to tell the truth about the matter; you see, sir, Bully McCrary was only getting what was coming to him.

"Old Wolfe went around to his place at the table, sat down, and eyed the McCrary crowd sharply.

"'You fellers over thar bend yore heads down'ards a little,' he repeated very quietly. 'I am now a-goin' to ax the blessin'. The' hain't no use in a-bein' damned hawgs jest cause we happens to be here in the penitency.'

"Every prisoner in the mess-hall bowed his head. So did the guards. And so, for that matter, did I. Since that time, Old Buck has said grace at every meal. He's held up his banner like a soldier, and most of the others have flocked to it. He was born to leadership, I'd say, born to rule. He's a king of his kind, sir."

Shortly afterward a messenger arrived with the fiddle and bow in a leathern case. The Governor took the case and put it on the desk at his side. The ringing of the gong announced that dinner was ready, and Warden Gray escorted the State's high light to the big mess-hall. They found the convicts seated at the long tables, which were well laden with the good things to eat one expects on Christmas Day.

Then the chief executive bared his head and raised one fine, white hand. In clear and impressive tones he repeated the old-fashioned blessing that he had heard so many thousands of times back in his boyhood home in Happy Valley.

Old Buck Wolfe echoed fervently the "Amen!" and added in the voice of a Goliath, "God bless the Governor!"

Pale Tom Ledworth rose and held up his glass of innocent wine in a hand that wasn't quite steady.

"The Governor," he cried, "God bless him!"

The other prisoners went to their feet and lifted their glasses high.

"The Governor," they cried, "God bless him!"

It rang and rang and rang.

Tennessee's best-loved man was suffering keenly at the heart. He was thinking of the lonesome and desolate homes of these men who were paying their debts to the law and to society, of the saddened fire-sides and empty chairs of this Christmas Day. He was thinking of the longing of women, and the prayers of women, and of the heavy crosses men make their mothers bear—their mothers, the finest fighters in the world.

"Warden," he whispered, his eyes bright and twinkling, "you'd better get me out of here."

"This way, sir."

The two of them went back to the office, sat down, and silently watched the whirling snow through the windows. When dinner was over, they went again to the mess-hall, and the Governor placed his fiddle and bow in the hands of Old Buck Wolfe.

"If you can play 'Buffalo Gals,'" he smiled, "play it. It comes very near to being my favorite jig."

"It's mine, my favorite," the big hillman exclaimed happily, "by a long shot!"

He handled the beloved instrument with reverence. It seemed that he feared his knotty, work-hardened hands would scar it. On his countenance was the light of a rapture that the owner of that fiddle, being himself a fiddler, understood. Old Wolfe began to play his favorite; his left foot kept time on the stone floor, and his huge body swayed rhythmically to and fro. Soon every other person present was tapping the floor with a restless foot. There is no gloomy note in "Buffalo Gals."

When the delighted mountaineer's wrists and fingers had become too weary to function properly, he lowered the instrument amid much applause. Then somebody lifted the cry, "One little tune from the Governor!" Others took it up, and it became a roar.

The Fiddling Governor took the fiddle and tightened two of its strings a trifle.

Because it was Christmas Day, the day of peace on earth and good will toward men.

"What shall it be, boys?" His eyes twinkled pleasurably.

Bully McCrary never made a greater mistake, though it came out all right in the end.

"Home, Sweet Home, if you please, sir," he begged.

The State's leading official rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Of course, he did not want to play that; there were those who would feel very much upset, if he did—why, it would be torture. But McCrary's gaze pleaded so hard; the melodramatic McCrary was ready to preach, pray, shout hallelujahs, sing, dance, or fight. The Governor put the fiddle into place and began, striving purposely to give a poor interpretation. But his fingers trembled in spite of him, rendering a delicate and soulful *vibrata*. The prisoners stared toward



one another with wide, friendly eyes. Then, one by one, they began to stare toward the floor.

Only a few bars had been played when Charley Wolfe, who had tried manfully to be a credit to his name, who had so bravely hidden all signs of his affliction, crumpled to his

knees and cried out in the musical hill dialect two unbidden words in one—"Goddle-mighty!"

Just that.

The Governor quickly passed his fiddle and bow into the hands of the warden, knelt beside Charley Wolfe, and swept back from the clammy brow the thick, dead-black hair. He lifted the lean face, saw a trace of red at each corner of the quivering, sensitive mouth, and knew. Charley Wolfe no longer had a secret.

"He's got the bugs, sure," very sympathetically said Bully McCrary, who also had seen. "He's got 'em, sure."

"Warden," the Governor asked, "how much is there left of this boy's sentence?"

"Let's see: with eight months counted off for good behavior—about three more months, sir."

The executive went to his feet. "I'll see that he's pardoned at once, Warden. While the matter is being arranged, keep him in the hospital; and tell the doctors to give him plenty of medicines and instructions when he starts for home—don't forget it."

"If you don't mind," Charley Wolfe murmured, rising with his father's help, "I'd like to stick it out, sir. I consider that this is a debt I owe. A Wolfe always pays his debts, and tells the truth, and keeps his word. I—I want to stick it out."

"You're going home," frowned Old Buck. "You've got to go, so you can get well. We'll be there with you, in about three more months. Don't say anything against it, Charley."

He was still the chief of the Wolfes. There was no disobeying him. Before the sick young man's mental vision there flashed scenes of home and loved ones and the majestic dim-blue mountains with their trees and rocks and sparkling streams. A great longing came to him, the longing he had fought away so many times. He caught the Governor's hand.

THREE months later, the rest of the Wolfes walked proudly out of the State's prison and started for the railway station. They were dressed in the clothing of Southern gentlemen, and they attracted no little attention on the street.

"Say, but we're sure goin' to miss 'em," remarked Bully McCrary to Pale Tom Ledworth. "Look at Warden Gray; even him, he's got that I-wonder-will-I-ever-be-happy-again look on him. Say, take this from me, Pallid, them was all men, them Wolfes."

"It's not being free that makes them so glad," Pale Tom replied in his soft voice. "They had a letter from home this morning, and it told them that Charley was improving rapidly. That's what makes them so glad."

XXV

IT CAME to pass in June.

There alighted from an early morning train in Conradsville, North Carolina, a tall and muscular, smooth-faced and sober-visaged, youngish man wearing boots that were laced high in front, a suit of blue serge, a blue flannel shirt, a slim, black tie, and a broad-rimmed black hat. He sent his baggage on to Johnsville, Tennessee, bought for himself a week's supply of traveling rations, and set out immediately, on foot and alone, for the heart of Doe River Wilderness.

It was, of course, Little Buck Wolfe, the Arnold Mason that was. He had been in the great Northwest, dealing in timberlands, for a little more than seven years.

His rise had not been meteoric, but it had been steady. He began by obtaining an option on a wide and finely-timbered boundary of woodland; soon afterward, he won the interest of a group of Eastern lumbermen, and arranged a transfer that gave him a cash base to build upon. Gradually he became known as a timber Midas. In the seven years he had cleared enough money to pay back all that had been lost in the Wolfe's Basin fire, and he was now on his way to pay it. Then the law could have him, if it still wanted him. But first he had to visit the little cabin that stood on the shore of the lake that was the source of Doe River.

During all that time, he had not written once to Colonel and Mrs. Mason. He considered his reason for not writing a very good one, indeed. Whitney Fair was post master at Johnsville. Wolfe's fear of being arrested before his purpose was accomplished had become



an obsession, overshadowing everything except the purpose itself. And then, the fine humility of the man had convinced him that without the money necessary to pay the colossal debt he was a nonentity, nothing, non-existent.

He reached Doe River at a point some two miles below the lake shortly before midnight. This bank of the stream was for the most part cliffs, and, as there was no visible way of effecting a crossing, the remainder of the journey to the cabin would of necessity have to be made in the daytime. Wolfe lighted a fire under a tree, rolled himself in his blanket, and went to sleep.

Early the next morning he rose and climbed down to the crystal-clear river's brink to bathe his face and hands. As he turned from the edge of the stream, he saw, lying on a near-by low ledge of the cliff, where some high water had left it years before, a bare and bleaching human skeleton.

Wolfe stood aghast, dumb, frozen. It had come from the lake, of course, but whose—*which was it?* Was it the skeleton of a man, or that of a woman?

He approached it slowly, knowing not whether to bless it or to curse it, to hold it sacred or to hate it. Then he saw on one of the arm bones, the unmistakable mark of a bullet, and he knew; it was the mark of the bullet that poor old Grandpap Singleton had fired that long gone day in Devil's Gate to save his, Wolfe's, life.

The bones were those of Cat-Eye Mayfield.

The realization clenched Wolfe's fists iron hard, sent him as white as a man in the grip of certain death. He would stone the accursed thing—he would crush to bits all that was left of that most unspeakable of wretches.

No, he wouldn't. He would do as Tot would have him do if she could know; this had been the motto, the balance-wheel, the guiding light of his seven years in exile. With his hands he made a hole in the soft black earth at the cliff's base, and buried the skeleton. When it was done, he felt glad that he had obeyed the finer impulse. And it was a consolation to know that Mayfield had been cheated of the last mean part of his triumph.

Wolfe looked up and down the river's banks for the other skeleton, and didn't find it. When one has drained the iron chalice, Fate is very apt to be merciful!

The little cabin was much dilapidated. Half the stone-and-clay chimney had tumbled down before the eternal onslaughts of wind and rain; a storm had carried away a fourth of the split-board roof. Ferns and rattleweed grew over the doorstep as though trying to bar the way to feet that might profane. Wolfe crossed the feeble green barrier, and entered his hollies of hollies, the place that had seen enacted his life's one perfect chapter. The interior was damp and musty and mildewed. The rafters were lined with the tiny homes of mudwasps. A copperhead lay coiled comfortably in the little pit where they had kept their savings hidden; he killed the snake with one shot from his revolver and threw it out.

There were a few mementoes of the gloriously happy days. A rusted table-knife, a rusted spoon, a broken dish, two mother-of-pearl buttons, a rusted wire hairpin, a rotting meal-bag window-curtain that Tot's own fingers had hemmed. He fondled them for a little while, a sort of Pagan worship in his eyes; then he put them down on the mildewed table and went out and sat in the lush grass beside the bluish-black lake for a long time. The milestones of his life trooped back to him there, passed before him one by one, like soldiers in review.

Two days and two nights he spent there in the silence.

He set out for Wolfe's Basin at day-break of a fine morning. Yellowhammers and squirrels were making love and quarreling everywhere in the forest about him.

Bright-winged butterflies were busily sipping honey from the tiny blossoms of the rattleweed; wild bees were humming about the pink-eyed bloom of the ivy and the white and waxen cups of the laurel flowers. It was springtime for every living thing on earth but him.

After walking hard all that day and all the next and one hour more, he reached the rugged, pine-fringed crest of a mountain that he believed to be his home mountain, the Big Blackfern. He strained his eyes to the westward, trying to make out in the darkness the shape of bald and majestic Picketts Dome above the Lost Trail. He saw dimly a peak that he believed to be Picketts Dome.

Then he went on, and halted at a point from which he could look down into the long, broad valley that lay below. In a building that stood in the center of that valley, there was a series of lighted windows.

"It's Sunday night, and that's a church," he said to himself. "I've lost my way. There's no church in Wolfe's Basin. That must be Beechwood. Perhaps—wait! Maybe I've—"

A fine hope broke into his heart; he was no very religious man—churches went with civilization's advance, always. When he reached the level land it was late, and there was not a light to be seen anywhere; a perfect stillness reigned. He found himself walking along a graveled street between two rows of vine-covered cottages. The mingled perfume of honeysuckles and roses was well-nigh intoxicating. He passed between a church and a schoolhouse, both of which were painted white.

There was a wide concrete bridge that had been built across a rippling, tinkling creek. He went over and turned up the stream, looking for a stately willow that stood over a bar of white sand. If he could but find the willow, he would know.

He found it, and he knew!

For the present, this was enough. He would wait until morning to meet his people. Besides, he dreaded having to tell the Singletons about poor Tot. He stretched his weary figure out on his blanket, and watched the bright stars—Grandpap Singletons's promises—through the branches of



the patriarchal tree until he went to sleep. He dreamed then that he sat on a burning desert with a heavy cup in his hand; and that a woman, in flowing white, came and took the cup from him, and dashed it away.

Little Buck Wolfe woke in a cold sweat. It was hard for him to go to sleep again.

When he woke, again, broad daylight had come. He rose, combed his hair with his fingers, put on his hat, and looked about him. Near-by stood an especially home-like cottage with an inviting veranda in front. All manner of sweet, old-fashioned flowers bloomed in the spacious yard. He went slowly toward it.

Sitting in a deep and comfortable veranda rocker, he saw a very old woman in dark-figured calico; she wore a red bandanna about her perfectly white head, and there was a long-stemmed clay pipe in her toothless mouth. It was Granny Wolfe, yet alive.

"Buck, is 'at you?" she asked shrilly as he approached. "'Pears like it's yore walk, and 'pears like it hain't. But whoever it is, come right on in and set down here wi' me. Hey?"

She was now almost blind. The strapping figure of her grandson was only a blur to her eyes.

Wolfe bent over her. "Don't you know me, grand—grammaw?"

The poor old creature did not recognize his voice. "Not from Adam's off ox, nor a side o' sole-leather!" she cried. "You're a stranger to me, shorely! And might I ax, dad-burn it, what ye're a-sellin'—lightnin'-rods, sewin'-machines, patent churns, spec's, potater-peelers, or hillside plows; hey?"

Wolfe dropped into a chair facing hers, and picked up one of her pitifully thin hands.

"I—I'm Little Buck, grammaw," he said, a trifle unsteadily.

She pulled her hand away quickly. "Stuff! Stuff!" she exclaimed. "It's a durned pore joke, stranger! Little Buck, pore boy, he's been dead a long time. And ef ye try to spring 'at joke on me ag'in, I'll bust ye acrost the forrard wi' my stick—ef I don't, I wisht I may drap dead right here in my tracks, and never git another breath!"

Wolfe shrugged, then he asked anxiously, "Are the Masons still living? And who—who has died here in the last seven years?"

"The Masons is both alive. Hain't been but one grown pusson died here in the last seven year; 'at was pore old Grandpap Bill

Singleton, the Prophet. Pore old Bill! Yes, he's done went up to his little shelter in the skies."

The assurance that both his fathers and both his mothers still lived filled Wolfe's heart with thankfulness. "If you'll only listen, grammaw," he pursued, "I'll prove to you that I'm Little—"

"Hush yore mouth!" she cut in angrily. "I hain't a-goin' to listen to no sech danged fool talk! But—" and she lowered her creaking voice to a whisper—"but I mustn't be so consarned loud. The widdier woman I live with here she's a-sleepin', and she mustn't be woke up. Pore gyurl, she set up mighty nigh it the whole night wi' Lon Singleton's little boy, Robert Bob, who went and et a whole wagon-load o' green apples yeste'day."

"So Lon is married?"

"Why, shore; he married Hallie Wolfe, o' course," rather irritably. "He was the fust pusson 'at ever married a Wolfe and kep' his own name. But sence then, the's been sev'ral Singletons married Wolfes and kep' their own names, jest as the's been sev'ral Wolfes married Singletons and kep' their names. I can tell ye, stranger, them 'ar Singletons is good folks, every one of 'em."

Wolfe looked thoughtfully out across the bottom of the great basin. Suddenly he realized that he was staring at one of a series of yawning holes that had been made in the base of the Blackfern. Those holes had not been there seven years before, certainly. He asked his grandmother about them.

"Iron," said the old woman.

"Iron!"

"Yes, iron." Three puffs at her clay pipe. "What they calls magnetic iron ore, and the finest in Ameriky—says the Colonel. Both mountains is chuck a-bust-in' full of it. My son, Buck, he found it whilst he was hid in a 'cave from the law. The depity he chased Buck back in the cave a hundred yards, and thar Buck found it. It was the treasure the dyin' stranger talked about a long, long time ago, and which Buck he allus thought was gold."

Her grandson gasped. She went on in her garrulous way.

"The colonel he took a-holt of it. He borried money from the bank, and bought t'other side o' both mountains,

bought out t'other part owners o' the lum-



ber comp'ny, and built the narrer-gauge railroad on down to the big blast furnace at Johnsville. This here—this here—er, what'n the devil was I a-talkin' about' anyhow? Oh, yes—iron. I never slep' none last night. Why, yes—the colonel he paid the bank back mighty soon, I'm a-tellin' ye, Mister!

"The colonel he gives all o' us Wolfes and Singletons work at plum' scan'lous good pay. Bless the bones of him, he built us a church and a schoolhouse, and brung in a fine teacher and a fine preacher; and he put up a big gen'al store and a post office fo' us, too. Utopia, 'at's the name o' the post office. Utopia, Tennessee. Purty, hain't it? And the colonel he gi' us all land in the name o' pore Little Buck, and he he'ped us to build dandy houses like these ye see. Se we're all happy 'cept fo' one thing, which is the losin' o' pore Little Buck. God rest the ashes o' him!

"Mister, I—" Again she caught herself and lowered her voice. "Durn my old pickcher, I allus was a fool fo' talkin'. Why, I bet I've done woke her up." (It was a safe bet) "I wisht these here drotted boys'd keep them wagon-loads o' green apples out o' their blasted little bellies, so's she could stay home o' nights whar she belongs. Anybody gits sick—she's the nuss and doctor."

The heart of Wolfe throbbed wildly. His most roseate hopes, long lost, had never touched so perfect a fulfilment of his dream, his big dream. If only he had Tot! If only she could know! The insufferableness of it made him weak. He slumped down a trifle in his chair.

The front door's screen opened and closed softly, and he heard the pattering of small feet beside him. It was a very little boy, chubbily-built; he was strutting proudly in his first pair of knee-trousers, real knee-trousers.

"Good morning, Judge!" smiled Wolfe.

"Good mawnin', suh!" the very little boy said sweetly, in a grown-up fashion that was delightfully ludicrous—and Wolfe knew then that the child had been much associated with old Colonel Mason, Southern gentleman. Granny Wolfe jumped out of the edge of a nap.

"Why, Bobolink!" she cackled. "You've come out here to show off yore new britches, you honey-dumplin'! His name, Mister, is Bob Taylor Wolfe; but the's so danged many Bob Taylor Wolfe's here in Utopia 'at we calls him mostly Bobolink to make a diffunce. He's got another name, too, which, down in the hearts of

us, we likes the best; I think it was his grampaw, Old Buck, my son, who put him up to it. Now, Bobolink, tell the stranger yore other name."

It came promptly, "Littlest Buck Wolfe."

Little Buck Wolfe went as white as chalk. He looked straight into the boy's wide, serious, unflinching eyes, and the light broke suddenly—he was looking into his own eyes. But he dared not hope. It couldn't be. Tot was dead; she had been dead for seven eternities of years. Still—

It was at that moment that the Littlest Buck Wolfe's mother came to the door. She was round-figured, mature, magnificent; her face was that of a Madonna; her hair was of the color of dark copper.

Her husband shot up straight.

"Tot!"

AFTER they had succeeded in convincing Granny Wolfe that she had been talking to her own grandson, Wolfe told the story of the tragedy, as he knew it, that had taken place at the lake that was the source of Doe River.

"Mayfield deceived us both," said Tot. "Most of what he told you was true. But instead of going down in the lake, I took the stolen money and my rifle and came back here to prove your innocence of the charge of robbing the company's safe. Mayfield had been threatening to kill me if I didn't marry him and run away to Virginia with him. I escaped by some means, I never could remember just how, for I was really sick and delirious; I got back here only after days and days of wandering. How he must have hated you, to die as he did! But he was blind.

"And the man in officer-blue was Lon, my brother!" she went on. "He had himself made a deputy-sheriff, and went to hunt Cat-Eye Mayfield. He didn't take any irons along; he meant to kill Mayfield. And that miserable little ant—what a tiny, tiny thing to keep us apart for so long! But life is like that."

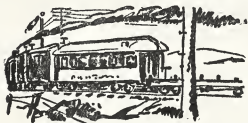
"Well, we won't be separated again," said Wolfe, "unless Whitney Fair has me prosecuted for helping my people get away."

"Whitney Fair is dead, and his family don't live in Johnsville any more," Tot replied. "I'm sure nobody else will remember it against you."

In which she was correct.

News of Little Buck Wolfe's return spread rapidly. The people of Utopia

hastened to welcome him; the Masons came up in a little passenger car carried by the daily ore train. It was a gala day, a



Christmas, a July Fourth, and a Thanksgiving Day, all in one.

When the pointed shadow of Picketts Dome was reaching for the crest of the Big Blackfern, Wolfe stole away with his wife to pay his respects, as it were, to the one soul that had not been there to greet him. Tot led the zigzag way up the bald peak, upon which the ironwood cross still stood. They gathered sheafs of waxen-

white laurel bloom, and later they put these in reverence on a mound between the great cross and a great boulder, the last earthly resting place of Grandpap Singleton, who had been called the Prophet.

"There, look," Tot said in the hushed voice of one who speaks in an atmosphere of holiness. She pointed. "The colonel had that done."

High on the even face of the huge stone had been cut in bold letters:

GRANDPAP WILLIAM SINGLETON

He, too, had drained life's iron chalice bravely. Wolfe's eyes dimmed.

And below the name, in the old hill dialect, had been chiseled in smaller letters this gem from the Prophet's crude philosophy, which well might ring down the centuries to come:

*To Them As Thinks The' Ain't No God
The' Ain't None, So Far As They're
Concerned*



THE NORTH WIND'S MESSAGE

By DANFORD G. BRITTON



Outside the North Wind howls and blusters,
As I sit by the friendly hearth;
And a picture comes in the leaping flames
From the land of the mystic north.
Where the silent trails lie dim and pale
In the glistening ice and snow;
And the hunger cry of the lean wolves' wail
With the mercury sixty below.
There the jack-pine's ghostly shadows
Ripple the snowy path;
While the gray clouds scud like a roaring flood
From the north wind's howling wrath.
And for those who travel that great white waste
In the numbing cold and frost,
Death lies in wait, like the hand of fate.
Stop fighting once—and you're lost,
But though the trail may be hard and crooked,
With many a twist and bend,
There's gold at the foot of the rainbow
For those who stick to the end.
Though it's not so much what you win,
If you lose, it's about the same;
But the test of a real man's metal, is,
Friend, are you still in the game?
So when you're near discouraged
And tempted to quit the fight,
Why remember the test of the long grim trail,
In the north land's arctic night.



IN MEMORY OF HENRY CLAY MANLEY

By THOMAS McMORROW

WHERE WOULD YOU TURN IF YOUR WHOLE FUTURE DEPENDED ON YOUR EARNING CAPACITY AT THE END OF EIGHTEEN MONTHS—AND YOU WERE OUT OF A JOB? AN INTERESTING QUESTION TO A CERTAIN YOUNG AMERICAN, AND WITH AN INTERESTING ANSWER

I

NOW, if I was running this country," said Paul Manley, lighting a new cigarette, and ending a diatribe against things as they were in the U. S. A. in the year 1920, "I tell you what I'd do! First I'd—"

A customer descended hurriedly from One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street into Hepp's Bargain Basement where Paul was employed as sales clerk.

"Want a pair of shoes!"

"What kind of shoes?" grumbled Paul. He would have liked his job in Hepp's Bargain Basement well enough if it weren't for customers always coming in and taking his mind off important affairs.

"A good, strong shoe. I'm not hard to suit," said the customer, a gray-haired and well-dressed business man.

"You're going to wear them—not me, mister," said Paul, yawning. He rose slowly from the bench at the back of the little shop, and came forward. He was a tall and skinny youth of about twenty.

"Sit down, will you?"

The customer sat down, thrust out his foot, and glanced at the clerk. Manley had walked away toward the shelves. The customer grunted, pulled a foot-rest to him, and began to unlace his shoe.

"I don't want a tan shoe," he said a moment later.

"I'm no mind-reader, mister," said Paul. He slapped the rejected shoe back into the box, and pulled out another pair.

"I don't want a vici kid," said the customer.

"That's the style nowadays."

"I don't care. I don't want it!"

"Well, try it on, can't you?" grumbled Paul. "There, how does it feel?"

"It's too tight. That's not my size."

"It certainly is your size! It's a 9-D, and that's what you've got on right now.

Don't tell me my business, mister. Look—see? That's your size."

"I say it doesn't fit! And I don't want a vici kid, anyway. I can have a good strong walking shoe if I want it, can't I?"

"Oh, you want a shoe for walking! Why didn't you say so in the first place and save my time? Sure, you can have it; I got no objection. What do you want to pay?"

"About six dollars."

"We don't keep cheap shoes, mister," said Paul, getting up from his knees.

"I don't want a cheap shoe."

"Yes, you do! What do you call a six dollar shoe, if it ain't a cheap shoe? Say, I might sell you one shoe for that."

"Young fellow," growled the customer, pulling on his own shoe again and jabbing viciously at the eyelets, "you couldn't sell me any shoe at all. You need a lesson in good manners, you do!"

"Go along now, mister," said Paul, reclining again on his bench. "You're in the wrong store, see?"

"I guess I showed that fresh guy where he got off," he chuckled satisfiedly as the enraged customer went stamping up the iron stairs to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street.

"Yah," grunted Ernest Birdsong, his fellow clerk from the ladder where he was sorting stock. Ernest was a recent arrival from Europe.

Paul sprawled on the bench and lit a cigarette, which he "ate" in long,



lung-filling inhalations.

"There you go," he went on, "working your fat head off. You'll learn better, or

I miss my guess! You're some of this here blamed pauper labor that wants to come here and lower the American standard of living. You ain't got the mind of a free man, Birdy. Go ahead, and work yourself to death, and see what you get for it! Old Hepp doesn't care a whoop for you or for me, except what he can get out of us. I'm telling you. That's where the old tight-wad's head is level; I don't care a whoop for him except for what I can get out of him, see? He's a blood-sucking capitalist, that's what old Hepp is. Pretty soft for him—five stores, and not a blamed thing to do but go around from one to the other, and crash the cash-register!"

"Yah, Mr. Paul," murmured Ernest attentively.

"Aw, gosh!" yawned Paul. "I'm feeling all in today. Had a big time last night, Birdy. Yep, we had a large time. Punished a quart between three of us, we did. Say, Birdie, I know where I can get genuine *Old Cobbler*, rye, for six bucks a bottle. You want some good booze?"

"No, Mr. Paul."

"Say, Birdy, I feel like taking in a movie today. There's nothing doing here, and you're going to stay anyhow, ain't you? Old Hepp won't be back until six, or half-past. You can take care of the store by yourself, can't you? I'll do as much for you some time. If old Hepp pops in, you say I got sick, and went around to see a doctor. So long—see you some more. Don't take any wooden money!"

II

HE PULLED on his overcoat, which was built out at the shoulders until it gave Paul still another of Jack Dempsey's dimensions. He adjusted it until he was as wide on one side as on the other, pulled out his cravat until it bowed, slanted his velour hat over one eye, and strode from the store. He strode; Paul's self-respect depended on his clothes. He never strode in a bathing-suit. When he was in a bathing-suit he sidled, and walked modestly, and even somewhat slinkingly, feeling distressingly naked. But now he strode, swinging his wide shoulders, and looking the world in the eye to stare it down.

He went over to the Belvedere—continuously, eleven to eleven, fifteen cents for the best seat in the house.

He had a crush on the young lady cashier of the Belvedere, who sat in a box in the middle of the foyer from eleven to eleven with intervals out, and worked an

apparatus which caused tickets to sprout in the slab before her as often as she was paid fifteen cents. Her single eye to his fifteen cents had titivated Paul's interest; as she could gaze upon him without excitement he thought she must be a very superior person. She had a share in securing his steady custom for the Belvedere.

"It'll be a nice day, if it don't rain," he said to her, and smiled fascinatingly.

She made an assenting noise through her broad, common sense nose, and did her trick with the apparatus.

"It'll be a long day, if it don't shrink!" he tried again, with a fixed grin. Paul could not afford a vaudeville show more than twice per week, and he tried to remember the jokes.

She looked up at him with a slight contraction of her brows. "I beg your pardon?" she said.

Paul leaned on the slab, and twisted his mouth sideways to spring the gag again; he felt that he had her going, at least a little.

"Shake it up!" called an impatient patron from the line.

Paul turned his shoulders slowly about, and surveyed the line, and knitted his black brows at a little man whose eyes were as innocent and timorous as a rabbit's.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked in a bass voice.

"No!" exclaimed the little man.

"Then don't try to hurry me!" said Paul, swinging his shoulders back again, and letting his heavy frown rest on the young lady cashier for a moment, so that she might see what kind of a man he was.

He came out of the Belvedere at half-

past five. His face was flushed from generous emotion and bad air, and his eyes were glassy from protracted staring at "Black Roger of Brimstone Gulch." An intending patron was talking to the young lady cashier.

"I say I give you a two!"



shouted the patron.

"It was a one," said the cashier patiently.

"Take your change, please. There's the dollar you gave me."

"That's a dollar fast enough," said the patron, "but it ain't the dollar I give you, because I didn't give you no dollar. I give you a two!"

"Do you want your dollar back?"

The patron, a short and dark-faced young man, drew back, lifted his shoulders, sighed noisily, and uttered an oath. It was not a very gross imprecation—he recognized that he was talking to a lady, and the rather suave way in which he swore almost robbed the utterance of offence.

"Here!" called Paul. "How dare you use language to a lady?"

"Is that so?" breathed the patron, turning.

Paul Manley narrowed his eyes and looked very bleakly at the low-set young man. "You heard me," he said.

"Wait a minute, lady," said the patron, waving a hand behind him as he lurched toward Paul. "Just wait a minute. Listen, fellow, what are you butting in for? Do you want a good smack in the nose?"

"Well, that's no way to talk to a girl," said Paul, weakening.

"Then I'll talk to you the same way!" He crowded up against Paul and shoved him back against the wall of the foyer. "Come on, you big cake-eater, and put up your hands! So you're working with her, are you?"

"Knock the big stiff out, Jimmy!" yelled a comrade joyfully.

"She's nothing to me," mumbled Paul, his bluff caving completely. "On the level, she isn't! Don't hit me. I didn't mean anything—honest, I didn't!"

"You're a liar," snarled Jimmy, roused to fury by the prospect of an easy victory. With sound military instinct he swung his fist for Paul's jaw, leaping forward and pivoting with the blow.

"Cheese it, Jimmy!" yelled his ally. "She's coming out!"

The young lady cashier had blown her police whistle and had flung open the door of her cage. She had evidently a reputation for peace-keeping, for Jimmy, who was tearing at Paul like a wolf at a sheep, now bent forward and hunched his shoulders toward his ears and ran off. Paul had crouched and covered up, and had taken the weight of his vicious blow on the forearm, but it had staggered him, and shaken his velour hat over his nose and dislocated the shoulders of his overcoat.

"Let me alone!" he yelled, when he felt her hand on his arm.

"He's gone," she said.

He straightened, coughed, and shook himself into order. She was gazing at him soberly, understandingly, and yet with an effect of admiring him.

"You're terribly hot-tempered, aren't you?" she said.

"That fellow was enough to make anybody mad."

"It was nice of you to take my part," she said. "I'm awfully obliged. As a usual thing I blow my whistle and get the policeman; there aren't many fellows will step up and take a girl's part, like you!"

"Well," said Paul, in a deeper and more assured tone, "that's the kind of man I am, I guess! I always stand up for a lady!"

"It was very brave of you. You're all right now, aren't you?"

"You bet I'm all right. Lucky for him he took me unawares. Why, say, I could work around him like a copper around a barrel!"

"I bet," she said. And she smiled at him again, nodded, and skipped back into her box.

Restored to his own good opinion by her deftness, Paul swaggered back to Hepp's Bargain Basement. He knew that she had seen the episode, and that she could not have misinterpreted it; but still he had not lost face.

Hepp was waiting for him. "Where were you the last two hours?"

"Aw, I wasn't feeling right."

Hepp, a short and big-bellied man with a pink and shining head, compressed his lips. "Look here, Manley, did you make this sale?"



"Yes," said Paul, glancing at the sales-slip. "That's some of my work, M. r. Hepp!"

"I might have recognized it. You sold this pair of shoes to a colored fellow, and he left his old shoes to be sent home. Well, he was in here just

now, raising Cain, and threatening to cut

me. You sent him a pair of ladies' dancing pumps in the box instead of his shoes, and he says he forgot the ten dollar bill that he had hidden in his old shoe. And he wanted it!"

"Aw, he's a liar!"

"Maybe so, but I was in no position to argue. Here's two dollars."

"What for? Thank you, Mr. Hepp!"

"For your pay up to tonight—twelve dollars, less the ten that I had to give to the colored fellow. Manley, you've got too much brains for the shoe business. You've got too much on your mind besides selling shoes. So we're going to part company. Keep your hat and coat on."

"You want me to quit?"

"Exactly," said Hepp, walking away. "Good luck, and good-by!"

"Then I'll quit!" shouted Paul indignantly. "I'll quit right here and now! Say, Hepp, I want to tell you a few. The matter with you is you don't know how to treat a white man. You're a blamed old slave-driver, that's what you are! You're a mean, stingy old tightwad! Where do you get that stuff—trying to fire me? Why, say, you old dumb-bell, I forgot more about the shoe business than you ever knew! I got too much brains for you—that's what's the matter. What do you know, anyhow? Put your hat on, you old fool—you're half-naked!"

He left the store hurriedly, and ran to the street. He had not had time to remember all the gags which he had saved up in loving anticipation of just this occasion, but he felt he had done pretty well.

"I guess I told him where he got off!" he jubilated.

III

PAUL lay in bed late the following morning. He was not much worried; he was out of a job, but he had been out of a job often before. He argued himself into feeling no shame at his discharge; after all, that was the natural end to any term of employment. He twisted and rolled in bed, holding his eyes shut, trying to hang onto sleep, but it finally escaped him.

He rose, dressed slowly, pushed over his ninety-eight cent alarm clock and walked down the stairs of his rooming-house.

"Mail, Mr. Manley!" called his landlady.

Paul glanced at the inscription of the envelope—"Beaks & Sipperman, Attor-

neys-at-law, 32 Nassau Street, New York City." Under his landlady's curious gaze he dropped it into his pocket.

He opened it in the cafeteria while eating his twenty-cent Club Breakfast.

Nov. 16th, 1920.

Dear Sir:

If you are the nephew of Henry Clay Manley, formerly of this city, we beg to inform you that your uncle died in August last in Omaha. The will is to be probated in this state, and our Mr. Beaks is nominated as executor and trustee. As you are the only heir-at-law of the testator, and are also a beneficiary under said trust, we request that you call upon us at your first convenience to receive citation and to be advised of your interest. Your uncle left a considerable estate.

Ask for our Mr. Beaks.

Very truly yours.

"Uncle Harry!" exclaimed Paul with shining eyes. "After all the letters I wrote him asking him to do something for me, and getting nothing out of him but hot air and advice, he dies and leaves me his fortune! Well, that is what I call handsome of him!"

He did not know his uncle Harry personally; Henry Clay Manley had gone to the West before Paul was born, and had never revisited New York. Paul had then no sentiment toward him, other than the anomalous kindness which anyone must feel toward a stranger who has been good enough to die and leave him money. He was even able to see that his uncle had shown foresight and wisdom in turning down his begging letters.

He scalded his mouth with hot coffee, and ran from the lunchroom to the subway kiosk. He saved a nickel by running the three blocks; he saved another nickel by dropping into the turnstile at the station a metal slug which a shift-eyed street fakir had sold him at six for five, and which was as good as a nickel for all the purposes of the Transit Company, save one. Paul beat his fare when he could, and refused to see harm in it; it cost the traction company nothing extra to carry him, whereas paying his fare would have made to him the poignant difference of a nickel.

He entered the Mutual Life building at 32 Nassau Street and wandered through the ramifying halls of that commodious and old-fashioned structure until he found

a door upon whose ground glass was lettered *Beaks & Sipperman*.



Mr. Beaks was at his piled desk in his private room. He was a big, old man with faded blue eyes; his manner was suave and cold.

"I'm in conference, Miss Prouty, until Mr. Manley leaves," he said to the office-girl. "Don't disturb

me. Sit here, Mr. Manley."

He picked a red-tibbioned document from a pigeonhole, snapped it open, stared at it, and blew through his lips softly and reflectively.

"This is your uncle's will. Did you know him very well?"

"Never saw him. He always lived out West."

"It's an unusual will, Mr. Manley. Did you ever write to your uncle, asking money of him?"

"More than once," grinned Paul.

"Yes; he left a queer will, and I'm not very thankful to him for making me trustee. However—he was an old friend. There's a trust provision here, Mr. Manley, for your benefit—or for the benefit of the Platte County Home for the Feeble-minded, as the event may prove. Your uncle's estate, Mr. Manley, should amount to ninety-five or one hundred thousand dollars after debts, funeral expenses, inheritance taxes, etc., have been paid. Are you working?"

"Not just now."

"What salary were you getting last?"

"Seventeen dollars per week."

"Listen to this clause, Mr. Manley:

"I have given much thought to the question of my responsibility toward my sister's son, Paul Manley, of the City and State of New York, who is my nearest relative and my only heir-at-law. It has seemed to me that this, my nephew, was an idle and worthless youth; nevertheless I feel that I should fail in my duty toward him, and toward the memory of my beloved sister, if I should make no provision for him in this my last will and testament.

"I do therefore ordain as a first charge upon the trust fund, that my said nephew shall receive monthly during the term of his natural life a sum equal to the monthly wage, salary or income which he is earning at any honest employment. So that my said nephew

may make fullest avail of this bequest, I direct that the earned income above referred to shall be the earned income of which he is in receipt eighteen months after he has been given personal notice of the terms of this provision. After my said nephew's decease, the principal of the trust fund with accumulations shall be paid over to the *Platte County Home for the Feeble-minded*, on the single condition that the name of that institution be changed to *The Henry Clay Manley Memorial*.

"So far," continued Mr. Beaks, looking over his spectacles at Paul, "we have plain sailing. You have now been put on notice. Eighteen months from today payments to you will begin, on the basis of the salary you are then earning."

"How much could I get?" breathed Paul.

"Between five and six thousand per year; between four and five hundred dollars per month."

Paul's eyes dilated. "But how am I to live until then?"

"You might begin to earn it."

"Work!" exclaimed Paul indignantly. "With all that money coming to me?"

"Your uncle," said Beaks, removing his glasses to polish them leisurely, "seems to have understood your bent of mind. You may work little or much as you please. But you will receive a stipend equal only to the income you are earning from honest work eighteen months hence! I see that term is ungrateful to you, here is one which you may like better:

"The above provision is upon the express term and condition that my said nephew shall engage in no remunerative work after he begins to receive this income from the trust fund. There shall be deducted from the payments to be made him sums equal to any moneys which he shall be receiving from any other sources; so that, to take full advantage of this provision for him, my said nephew shall be required to abandon all efforts to support himself, and to engage in no remunerative work whatsoever.

"In other words," said Beaks, "you are debarred from earning your own living so long as you take this money; you are expressly forbidden to work!"

"Is there anything else?" asked Paul, wondering why Beaks paused.

"You have no objection to that?"

"Of course not! You don't think I'd be fool enough to work if I didn't have to, do you? That's only common sense, that part. Up to six thousand per year—why, say, I'll live in clover!"

"Your confidence is inspiring," said Beaks in a tone that was slightly nasal. "There is one further provision, covering the contingency that you will refuse to accept the proposed annuity according to its terms."

"You need not bother to read that part, Mr. Beaks," said Paul politely.

But Beaks proceeded to read it, unheeding:

"If my said nephew shall refuse to accept the said beneficial interest according to its terms, he shall receive nothing whatever from my estate, but my entire estate shall be divided, share and share alike, among the institutions named in the sealed letter of instructions which will be found in my vault of deposit and which will be given unopened to my executor and trustee. To avoid raising expectations which might be disappointed, and to prevent any attempt at collusion between my said nephew and possibly venal officials of these institutions or any of them, I hereby enjoin and direct my said executor and trustee to preserve this letter of instructions inviolate and unopened until my said nephew shall, at the end and termination of the said period of eighteen months, have definitely refused and rejected the above mentioned life-estate in the trust fund."

"When I do," nodded Paul. "Believe me, if they are going to wait until I throw that easy money over my shoulder they are going to wait!"

"There is the letter to which the will refers," said Beaks, pointing to the pigeon-hole. "As it is to all effects and purposes a part of this will, it should be proven with the will; the Surrogate may decide that the institutions referred to are entitled to citation. On the other hand, the will vests me with the power of sale during the eighteen months, so that there is no suspension of the power of alienation. We may have to withhold the will from probate until the end of the eighteen-month period.

"However," he said, sitting up to his desk again, "these worries do not interest you! I shall find a way to carry out my old friend's wishes. Good day, Mr. Manley! Don't forget to come here eighteen months from today, and after you

have formally accepted the bequest I shall commence to pay you seventeen dollars a week."

"Seventeen dollars per week!"

"Unless the wage-level should fall, Mr. Manley, as some economists predict. After having had the pleasure of knowing you, it seems to me highly improbable that I shall be required to pay you more."

"Well," said Paul, suddenly troubled, "it will be a whole lot more than that—but—where in thunder am I to get a job that will pay me five or six thousand per year?"

"That is for you to discover," said Beaks, smiling moonishly at him through his glasses. "You will certainly be a very exceptional young man if you get it. Here is a copy of the will. Ponder it. Digest it. Note the provision that the trust is to lapse as to you if you contest it. You have my best wishes, and I am sure that you had the best wishes of your uncle, as well as his lively distrust. You have eighteen months during which you may fix the income you shall receive during the lifetime of inactivity whose prospect seems to please you. You may call me up, if there is anything I can explain. Good day!"

He picked up his desk telephone. "The conference is ended, Miss Prouty," he said.

IV

PAUL went down into the subway in a daze; so distraught was he that he dropped a real nickel into the turnstile.

Five or six thousand per year! He didn't know anybody who made such a royal salary. He knew, by hearsay, that such lucky fellows existed; he supposed that the towering buildings of lower New York must house a number of them. He had heard that movie actors made a million dollars per year apiece, but such large sums meant nothing to him—as, in all



probability, they mean nothing to many movie actors. Men in banks, where money is visible in heaps, made no such salaries; he knew a paying-teller in a Harlem bank who sat amid currency like a

junkman amid bundles of old newspapers, and he made per week only twenty-three dollars.

But, if he could only get it, what couldn't he do with five or six thousand per year! Why, he couldn't waste time working if he was ever to spend so much money; his uncle had shown sense there. For ten dollars per week he could get a large and sunny room in a swell apartment, with hot and cold water, steam heat, electric light, and breakfast optional. He would have a belted dressing-gown—five dollars in Son-nenthal's—and a smoking table with Virginia and Turkish and English cigarettes. After his optional breakfast he would lay off in an easy chair, and read three or four newspapers—he had never had time to read newspapers thoroughly. He would smoke cigarettes, yawning and tapping his mouth, and glancing occasionally through the window to see ordinary people hurrying about their work.

If the day was fine he would take a stroll down Seventh Avenue—he pictured the apartment as situated on Seventh Avenue—and in the afternoon he would take in a matinee; the best matinees in Harlem could be taken in complete for a dollar. When the show was done he would stroll and saunter some more, across One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, slapping his stick jauntily against his faultlessly creased trouser-leg, watching common working people exuding wearily from stores and offices and lofts, nodding slightly to his friends. He would dine at a Greek restaurant, a rotisserie, at a secluded little table beneath a pink shade, waving the obsequious waiter and the menu away, and ordering the Regular Dinner like a lord.

He would invite fellows to his rooms—he did not see that he could utilize more than one room, but rooms would be the right word. He would have a square-face of gin in his rooms—he could get it for two and a half, and the real stuff—and he would have rye, and a bottle of pale and smoky Scotch.

But all this would not exhaust five or six thousand per year. Sometimes he would go to other fellows' rooms, and would drink free of their rye and their Scotch. He would have a lot of money left over, week after week.

Well—he could play the ponies! He had always wanted to play the ponies, but the game had been too rich for his blood. But five or six thousand per year would be ample. It would be more than he could use. Why, even fifty per week would be

wonderful; that would be three times the salary on which he had been managing to get along. He didn't know any fellow who was making fifty per week. He would be as snug inside it as a worm inside a nut. But—

He had to get it. Even if he was modest enough to be satisfied with it, he would not get it until he had earned it. What had possessed his old fool of an uncle to stick such a joker in? Why, Paul could not begin to earn fifty per week in a month of Sundays! Spend it? Well, yes, there was some chance of that. But earn it? Get some miserable tight-wad of an employer to put into his glad hand five big,



crinkly, glistening, vividly green ten-dollar bills every Saturday? He could see him doing it—yes, he could!

So, sunk in an April state of mind, alternating glorious sunshine and overcast weather, he arrived at One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street again, walked west, toward the Belvedere. He did not know why he was going there; but there was one person who knew something about him, one person who had caught a glimpse of him, one person upon whom he had not imposed a fictitious Paul Manley.

The pleasant-faced cashier was just going to lunch. Paul lifted his hat; she was passing him with a curt nod when she noticed that his face was troubled.

"Listen," he said, "could I talk to you a little bit? I want to ask you something. Can I take you to lunch?"

"If you let me pay my own."

"Oh, sure, that will be all right! Let's go over to the Palace cafeteria; that's a nice place and they got tables for ladies."

He escorted her into the lunchroom, and took off his hat when he sat down. The numerous unaccompanied men in the place wore their hats.

"Let's have some of that ox-tail braise," he suggested. "It's nice here. It's made out of the tail of an ox."

"Maybe," she said. "We have it in our house on Mondays, ox-tail soup—my mother makes it out of the neck of a chicken!"

They laughed. "Two ox-tail braises," ordered Paul.

"Listen," he said, after they had ex-

changed introductions, "An uncle of mine died, and left me a big fortune!"

"You always have a new one, Mr. Manley," she said with expectant smile. "Well, go ahead and spring it."

"Spring what?"

"The joke! Or am I supposed to ask something? Who is your uncle, or what did he die of, or something like that? I'm awful slow, Mr. Manley."

"This ain't a joke. Well, it is a kind of a joke, too. Read over this letter, and then I'll tell you about it."

She read the letter, and then he told her about it. "So now you see what I'm up against. Where in heck am I to pull down five or six thousand per year?"

"Oh, you could do it if you put your mind down to it. What do you work at?"

"Well, just now I am not working. To tell you the truth, I got canned yesterday. I was working over in Hepp's Bargain Basement, and the boss got me sore, and I got right up and told him where he got off. You know I got a hot temper."

"What were you getting?"

"Seventeen dollars."

"That's not much for a fellow like you. Don't you know any trade?"

"Nothing better than selling shoes."

He spoke in a low tone of voice, glancing guardedly about him to see that he was not overheard. Mingled with his humiliation,

he felt a certain rare pleasure in telling this girl the truth; but he was quite content to enjoy this pleasure at her expense only, and would probably have been very unhappy if it had been broadcasted that Paul Manley had

been fired from a job which paid seventeen dollars a week.

"Oh, I can get another job easily enough," he said. "I've had so many jobs that I know about what to say. It's always easier to get a job than to hold it, is my experience."

She stared at him in reflection. "Do you know what I would do, if I were you?"

"That's just what I'm asking."

"Then listen here. You're going to get as much money as you're earning a year and a half from now, isn't that so? Very well. Now what are you going to earn it at? The thing you know best is selling shoes. But if you go into a shoe store and ask for a job, they're going to ask where you worked last, and then it will come out that you were fired. You will start off with a black eye. The best thing you can do is to go right back to Hepp's, and ask for your job back."

"I should say not! Me ask that old crab for a job?"

"Supposing he is an old crab, what do you care? All you want is to work up to a good salary, isn't it? And you are not going to stay there for good. If you stayed there for a year and a half, and worked up to a good salary, then he would be sorry to lose you, and you could get right up and tell him to keep his old job!"

"Do you really think he would be sorry to lose me?" asked Paul doubtfully.

"Why, certainly! And that would be some satisfaction, wouldn't it?"

"Well, I guess he will not give me the job back. He didn't know how to appreciate a man, Hepp didn't!"

"You are worrying too much about Mr. Hepp, and what he thinks. Will you go around and ask him for the job back?"

"I would not do it for anybody else in the world, but I will," he said, bowing his high spirit. "Since you ask me to, Miss Hazeltine! I will give Hepp one more chance!"

V

HE FOUND Hepp in his Lenox Avenue store; Hepp had five of these basement establishments, devoted to selling samples and jobs at cut prices.

"Well?" snapped Hepp, contracting his flaxen eyebrows.

"Mr. Hepp," mumbled Paul, "I find I made a mistake."

"About time you found that out—seeing that you've been making nothing but mistakes ever since I took you on. Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

"I'd like my job back, Mr. Hepp. I've been thinking it over, and I see where I was wrong, and I see the right thing to do is to come back and tell you. If you take me on again, Mr. Hepp, you'll never get a chance to fire me again!"

Hepp grunted, with a twinkle of malice in his eyes. "I don't know what you



want to work for a slave-driver like me for."

"You're not a slave-driver, Mr. Hepp. You always treated me pretty white!"

"Excepting for the salary. Seeing that I am a darned old tight-wad and that you know all about the shoe business already, I don't see what you want to come in here for. I'm nothing but an old fool!"

"I take it all back, Mr. Hepp."

"Very well, Manley," said Hepp, nodding and walking away.

"Do I get my job back, Mr. Hepp?"

"No!" cried Hepp, who was not at all forgiving.

Paul lingered by the door for another word. He had made up his mind to have this job. He felt that he must have it. And with matters so, with the scales tilted against him, he looked at the stairs and saw descending the gray-haired gentleman whom he had dismissed so cavalierly from the One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street store the day before. By a cruel stroke of fortune, the customer was still seeking the shoes which Paul had denied him, and now he had come here to ruin Paul's slim chance. He would recognize Paul, complain to Hepp, and Paul would be finished.

Paul scowled at him as he entered. The customer looked at him.

With sudden recklessness Paul dismissed his scowl, put on an urbane smile, and stepped forward.

"Good afternoon, sir!" he said, chafing his hands together.

"Want a pair of shoes," grumbled the customer. "And for heaven's sake, hurry up!"

"Yes, sir," said Paul, springing to a foot-rest, and snapping it into place under the gentleman's foot. "A good, strong walking shoe, I suppose? Something about six dollars?"

"Exactly!" said the customer with surprise.

"We have the very thing will please you, sir," said Paul, putting his customer's unshod foot down with reverence.

"You're not taking my size!"

"I will if you wish, sir, but I should say a 9-D would be about right."

"It is right," said the customer, who had not recognized Paul.

"This is our style A515, sir. May I try it on? We sell these mostly to customers of your standing. It's a strong shoe, but still rather dressy."

"Feels pretty good," said the customer, standing up. "The left one is a little snug in the toe."

"I'll stretch it a bit, if you wish. Or would you rather try a larger size. I wouldn't advise you to, but it won't be any trouble to try it. That's what we're here for!"

"No, these will do. You might stretch that left one a bit at the toe."

Hepp had stalked menacingly forward, but had halted when he saw that the customer could not be disengaged from Paul without a small scene. He stood by, watching. Paul carried away the offending shoe.

"You know your business, young man," said the customer satisfiedly.

"We do our best to please people," smiled Paul.

"Not all of them do," frowned the customer. "I was in a shoe store yesterday, and had words with the laziest and most impudent young puppy I ever met in my life! But you seem to know how to handle people here. Well, good day to you. You'll see me again!"

He left the shop.

"Mr. Hepp," said Paul, "can I have my job back?"

"You took it!" grinned his employer.

"You might as well keep it now!"

During his supper hour he hurried up to the Belvedere, and spoke to Miss Molly Hazeltine through her little window. It was half-past six, and she was not busy.

"Fine!" she said, smiling at him with warm and friendly eyes. "I knew you could do it!"

"I didn't," said Paul. "Gosh, it takes a girl to show a fellow what he can do. If you would only stay my friend, Miss Hazeltine, and keep tipping me off to things I can do, I bet I will have a salary in eighteen months that will make that old crab of a lawyer look sick. We will see if he is going to pay me any seventeen dollars a week!"

"That's the talk," she said. "Show him how much he knows—it is a whole lot better than just telling him."

"You got Sunday off, haven't you?"

"Every Sunday."



"Maybe we could take a little walk. I got an awful lot to discuss with you, Miss Hazeltine. If I could take a walk with you every Sunday, and come around and see you between times——"

"You could come around and take me for a walk next Sunday, Mr. Manley. Or what do you say if you come around to dinner first, and meet my mother? I was telling her about you."

"Next Sunday!"

VI

IT MAY help us to understand the change in Paul Manley if we shadow him while he is in the company of Miss Molly Hazeltine. Paul had resolved well; but a long course of conduct, as many can tell, is not stably founded on any mere resolution. It must be founded on character; on some one else's character, if need be, until repetition breeds habit in the subject.

"Here's an ad in the paper today," said Molly, "that says, 'Corporation formed complete for fifty-seven dollars.' That does not look as if a corporation amounted to so much. What is a corporation anyway, Paul?"

"Gosh, Molly, you've got your asking clothes on today again! You wouldn't know any more about these matters if I was to talk to you all day."

"You know so many things that I don't," she said regretfully. "Oh, Paul, I met the nicest fellow over at the church supper last night! He's an instructor at Columbia, and he knows more than any man I ever met, excepting you, Paul. I'll ask him, Paul, but he doesn't explain half so nicely as you do."

"Well, I'm a practical business man," said Paul. "Naturally, I would understand about practical matters better than any college professor. Don't mind asking him, now."

"What is this here about Stormy Meeting in Board of Estimate? What do they do?"

"I got to run along, Molly," said Paul, frowning at his watch. "See you some more, Molly!"

That afternoon, in his free time, he strolled into the local Y. M. C. A. reading room, to pass an hour with the magazines on file. He read an exciting story of life among savages in the South Seas, and another about a young man's great fight against a grasping corporation in the Yukon country. These stories thrilled him, as ever, but the thrill was not followed

by the old reaction of dissatisfaction and discouragement; he was learning that there was place and opportunity for the most strenuous young man even in New York. He put the magazine back in the rack, and sauntered to the bulletin-board.

"What's civics?" he inquired at the desk. "I see there's a course to be given in that."

"It tells you all about Government. You ought to take that, and then you'll know what you're voting about. It's free, except that you have to buy the book."

"Put me down for it, will you?" requested Paul. "Lots of questions pop into my mind about such things, and I can't think of the answer!"

One Sunday night Molly treated him to the performance at the Belvedere.

The picture had to do with the perils and triumphs of an American youth in a banana republic. The hero of the picture had been nobody in particular in the United States, but he was an American, and when he arrived in the capital of the southern country he promptly took the center of the stage by right of birth. He had failed in business in the United States, but down there he seized hold of affairs—economic, social, political

—with amazing verve and ability. In due course, he married the beautiful daughter of the dictator, and arranged to take over the country in bulk—but we have only to do with the episode wherein he was rescued from man-eating land-crabs by a detail of U. S. Marines.

"Yea-a!" exhaled Paul with delight and relief when the forefront of the gallant Marines appeared on the jungle trail, spurring to the rescue with excellent horsemanship.

"You're hurting my hand," said Molly. "They do look fine, don't they? I just love soldiers!"

"Good old leathernecks," sighed Paul. "I tell you what, Molly, it takes us Americans to show those people where they get off!"

"It certainly does," said Molly. "I bet you could get to be a dictator of one of those countries, too, Paul."

"Well," said Paul slowly, "seeing that I am an American, I guess I would have the bulge on them all right."



"Some of those South Americans look awfully mean. You would have to watch out for them, Paul. That was a machine-gun that he killed Don Henriquez' army with, wasn't it? How does a machine-gun work, Paul?"

"Well, it is quite a complicated mechanism. I do not think I could explain it to you so you would understand."

"Did you ever see one?"

"Not so as to examine it. Not real close. But I learn quickly about firearms. I had a pistol once, and my mother took it off me, or I bet I would be a dead shot by now."

"You would look grand in a uniform, Paul. I always say a real tall man looks grand in a uniform!"

"Not so poor, I guess."

"Listen, Paul, Pete Forest's regiment in the National Guard has got a smoker on for next Saturday night, and Pete told me he has to bring along an outsider. So I promised him you would go with him. I told him you would carry the flag for them, and he said he would speak to the color-sergeant about it, but meanwhile for you to come around."

"You might have asked me first."

"But I knew you'd enjoy it. It's just camping out, Paul, and that's fun. Pete Forest says you'll have the time of your life, being that you are fond of walking; and if you get tired or hungry, you can tell the complaint-sergeant and he will see about it. You'll go, won't you?"

"Oh, I suppose so!"

VII

MR. MANLEY," said the office-girl. "Show him in," said Mr. Beaks, glancing at the calendar which showed a date in May, 1922.

Paul and Molly entered. Paul looked nervous but determined; Molly wore that look of tranquil beatitude which the world cannot give to a girl, unless it has first given her an engagement ring with a genuine solitaire diamond in it. She was wearing the ring, and not trying to hide it. "Good afternoon, Mr. Beaks," said Paul. "Miss Hazeltine—Mr. Beaks!"

Chairs were taken.

"I suppose you have come in regard to the trust under your uncle's will," said Beaks, reaching into the pigeonhole for the red-ribboned document. "May I ask you, Mr. Manley, what salary you are receiving?"

"Thirty-two dollars per week. I'm

manager of one of Hepp's Bargain Basements, up in Harlem."

"Indeed! That is a great improvement over an earning capacity of seventeen dollars per week, and no employment. I congratulate you, Mr. Manley! You must have worked hard and steadily during the past eighteen months."

"I worked," nodded Paul curtly. He did not like Beaks.

"You are coming into a very nice thing," purred Beaks. "Thirty-two dollars per week for the term of your natural life! Many lawyers don't net that much, Mr. Manley. You should be able to live very nicely on it."

"Listen to me," said Paul gruffly. "That part about my not working any more; I've been talking that over with Miss Hazeltine here, and we've decided to make you a proposition! I'm a business man, and I'm talking business. I can make a whole lot more than thirty-two dollars per week later on, but on the other hand I don't see why I should have to lose all that money. I'll take half of it—sixteen dollars a week—and the Feeble-minded Home can have the other sixteen—providing you take out that part about my not working! Come, is that fair?"

"A very fair proposition," said Mr. Beaks, polishing his glasses with his bandanna. "I should certainly advise the officials of the Home to accept it, if it rested with me. But, unfortunately, Mr. Manley, I am simply a trustee, and I must abide by the terms of the trust instrument which created me. I have no discretion. You must take thirty-two dollars per week, with the stipulation that if you earn any money it will be deducted—or you must take nothing. As the will is drawn, and as I construe it, you must make your final and binding decision to-day."

"I beg to point out to you that you have no reason to feel harshly toward your uncle. You have already received incalculable benefits from his provision for you. When you came here eighteen months ago, you would have taken your then salary of seventeen dollars per week and you would very willingly have refrained from ever working again. You will pardon me if I say that you were at that time unfit to be given money; you were idle,



unambitious, and I think, rather dissipated. I am an old man, Mr. Manley, and an old lawyer, and I have seen many times the deplorable effects of freeing young men from the discipline of honest work. You have had now before you for eighteen months an incentive to do your best—the hope of never having to work again. You now confront the fact that you don't want what you strove so hard to get. That's a common human experience, Mr. Manley. I can do nothing for you; if you refuse to accept this money according to its terms, it must all go to the institutions named in the letter of instruction here."

Paul looked into Molly's eyes, and then he straightened.

"I'm not going to take it," he said.

"This is your final decision?"

"It is. I'm not a bum; I can make my own living. When I can't—why, then I'll move into the Home for the Feeble-minded!"

"Oh, Paul!" cried Molly. "I'm so glad!"

"Allow me to congratulate you again, my boy," said Beaks, rising and clasping Paul's hand. "I'm sure you've done exactly what your uncle hoped. If you took this money it would have ruined you, or, better, it would have proven you lazy and worthless. Your uncle was a shrewd and penetrating man of affairs; in this matter he has shown no feeble-mindedness worthy of commemoration."

He bowed the young couple out.

They had entered the hall, and were waiting for an elevator, when the office-girl came running out to them.

"Mr. Beaks wants you again, please!"

They re-entered the law office. Beaks waved them to chairs, and continued his study of the letter of instructions, which he had opened upon their leaving.

They waited in silence.

He turned abruptly, and thrust into Paul's hand the single sheet of heavy paper which had been contained in the letter of instructions. Upon it, in pen and ink, were these words only:

Institutions referred to in my will which are to receive the principal of my estate

upon my only nephew's refusal to accept trust provision.

NONE.

Henry Clay Manley.

"What—what does it mean?" asked Paul.

"It means," said Mr. Beaks, "that your uncle died intestate, except for the provision for the payment of funeral expenses, debts, taxes and my fees. The trust has terminated, and I am now required to pay over the principal to the rightful heirs. Inasmuch as he has made no disposition of his estate, it must go according to the Table of Descent."

"To whom?"

"To you, Mr. Manley!" said Mr. Beaks. "You are the only heir-at-law. Your uncle had the right to leave the money elsewhere, but he has not done so."

"Then I'm to get the whole thing," muttered Paul dazedly. "I—I don't understand this. Don't joke with me. I don't believe it. Six thousand per year! No, no. Are you telling me the truth? Molly, you heard him? Prove it to me. Give me five hundred dollars!"

"Currency?"

"Yes, real money."

They watched Beaks bending down before his safe, and twirling the knob, and methodically counting a sheaf of greenbacks.

"Here it is, Mr. Manley. And I wish to say—"

He stared after them. Paul had caught Molly by the hand and was hurrying with her to the door.



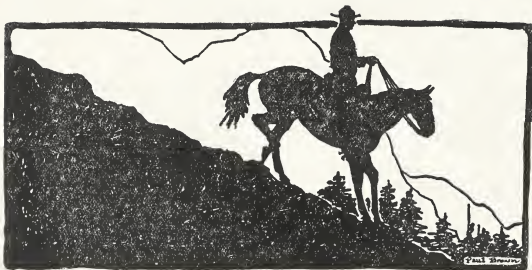
He bundled her into an elevator, and then pulled her out into Nassau Street.

"What's the matter, Paul?" she cried, joyously but perplexedly.

"The Municipal Building closes at four o'clock!" he said, urging her on. "If we don't get there in ten minutes, we can't get the marriage license today! No, tomorrow won't do! Hurry up, Molly, can't you run a little faster? I've had dreams like this before, and I'm not going to sleep again until this one comes true!"

EARLIEST BUILDING STRIKE ON RECORD

LABOR troubles in the building trades are not as modern as most people think. A recently discovered Egyptian inscription records the fact that the laborers employed on one of the pyramids struck and refused to go on with the work unless their daily ration of onions was increased. They won the strike.



FIRES OF FATE

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Cultus Collins and the Ghost Gold," "The Proof of Progress," etc.

IT TOOK A BUNCH OF CROOKS ALONG THE CANADIAN BORDER QUITE A LONG TIME TO LEARN THEIR LESSON—THAT YOU CAN BUCK THE "MOUNTIES" JUST SO LONG, BUT THEY GET YOU IN THE END. BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOW THAT THERE WAS A MONTANA COWPUNCHER IN THE RANKS OF THE R. N. W. M. P.

CHAPTER I

THE RESIGNATION

MONK MAGEE is so dog-gone low-down that he could put on a plug-hat and walk under a snake," declared Bud Conley seriously, as he turned in the doorway and looked back at Inspector Grandon of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, who was seated at a desk, looking indifferently at a paper which Bud had just placed before him.

Grandon's eyebrows lifted a trifle, but he did not look at Bud, as he said crisply, "Perhaps that is true, Conley; still, he is no fool."

"You mean that he's got brains?" asked Bud. "Hell! All Magee's head is good for is to keep his ears from rubbin' on each other."

Grandon's thin lips twisted slightly. Coney's quaint sayings amused him at times, although he hated to admit it. Conley's indifference to discipline, absolute disregard for his superior officers, rasped Grandon to the quick; and he was not at all sorry that Conley was no longer a member of the R. N. W. M. P.

"I reckon I can consider m'self fired, can't I?" queried Bud, as he slowly rolled a cigarette.

"Yes. You are no longer a member of the force, Conley."

"And I never even got m'self drunk like a gentleman," wailed Bud. "One big shot of wobble-water and I went out and lost m' fly-wheel. Hell's delight, but that Magee hootch would make a moth-miller lick a hen-hawk!"

"And there was that complaint from Beaudet," reminded the inspector softly and meaningly.

Bud whirled quickly and came back to the desk.

"That was a damn lie!" he snapped, as he leaned forward, his gray eyes boring into the startled face of the officer.

"I'm no longer a policeman, Grandon—remember that. I've handed in m' resignation, you'll notice. I may only be a cowboy from Montana, as some of the red-coats have said behind my back, but I've got a mother some'ers and I used t' have a sister."

The anger faded from Bud's eyes and a wistful expression crossed his seamed face, as his mind seemed to flash back

through time. Then he shook his head and looked at the inspector.

"Hold your temper!" ordered the inspector coldly. "I am not in the habit of being——"

"Aw-w-w, hell!" interrupted Bud wearily. "I dunno how I've stood this as long as I have; danged if I do."

He turned away and walked back to the door, looking at the thumb and index finger of his right hand, which were badly stained with ink. Bud had little education, and the writing of his resignation, brief as it was, had been a man-sized task.

Bud was of medium height, slim-waisted, long-armed. His pugnacious jaw, tilted nose and mop of unruly hair gave no lie to his ancestry. He hated discipline, petty details, and his blood inheritance from a line of Irish ancestors rebelled and his tongue snapped in spite of punishment. Bud had been a top-hand in cow-land, which meant ability—plus.

Just now Bud was both mad and muddled. The day before he had been sent out to try and locate the party or parties who had been selling whisky to a bunch of Indians.

Liquor was taboo, even to the whites, but the Mounted had never been able to stop its import. The Indians had secured a large quantity—large enough to incite them to wondrous deeds—with the result that a number of them had made a pilgrimage to the Happy Hunting ground.

The little town of Kingsburg was a sore spot to the Mounted. Here lived Monk Magee, a big, burly, bull-necked individual, who hated the Mounted, and was a never-ending source of irritation to them. The town's close proximity to the border of the United States made it a useful place for the outlaws of both sides of the boundary. To them it was but a mythical line, to be crossed at will; a line which gave them sort of a sanctuary and blocked the efforts of law enforcement.

Magee was proprietor of a hotel—the Magee Rest. No one, or at least very few, people ever put up at his hostelry; but Magee waxed prosperous and never complained over poor business. The border element came to Magee's place, and he was usually surrounded by a bunch of questionable characters. But the Mounted were unable to fasten horse or cattle stealing or liquor running onto Magee.

The day before his forced resignation Bud had gone to Kingsburg, hoping for something to happen to break the mo-

notony—and it did. At Magee's place Bud ran into two punchers from just over the Montana border, and Bud knew these two men as rustlers. They knew Bud, but did not recognize him.



The place was orderly enough, as far as Bud could see, but he was, as he expressed it, "a little leary of the whole outfit." Magee was outwardly friendly to Bud, and talked to him about the Indian liquor selling trouble.

"I sabe how they suspect me," said Magee confidentially, "and mebber I don't blame 'em. I've got a little good liquor, Conley—for my friends."

"Thasall right," admitted Bud. "I ain't ridin' yuh, am I, Magee? 'F yo're sellin' hootch to the reds, you'll get yours sooner or later. The Mounties always get their man, yuh know."

"Sure, I sabe that, Conley, but just t' show yuh that I ain't concealin' anythin', I'll ask yuh to have a little drink from my private stock. Whatcha say?"

"I'll say that she's a long dry spell," said Bud.

Magee went into the rear room of the place and came out with two glasses of liquor. There was no attempt at concealing anything. The liquor was very strong and of a peculiar taste, but Bud did not feel that anything was wrong until Magee's face and form began to separate into many more Magees; so many that the room seemed densely populated with Magees.

Then the Magee army and everything else faded out and Bud's senses with them. When Bud came back to his senses he found himself at headquarters, his clothes whisky soaked, a bottle of liquor in his pocket and disgrace staring him in the face.

From the lips of old Angus MacPherson Bud found out that he had been found on the road, just at the outskirts of Kingsburg, drunk as a fool. And with him was Marie Beaudet, a young half-breed girl, just as drunk as he.

He was also informed by MacPherson, who had no sympathy for anybody, that Joe Burgoyne, who was engaged to Marie Beaudet, had sworn to kill him on sight—if old Louis Beaudet did not beat him to it. Joe was a gambling half-breed, with a hawk-like face, a lean, lithe body and uncanny ability with a knife.

Bud scowled deeply and it seemed to please MacPherson immensely.

"And Bur-r-goyne will do it, too," declared the Scot ominously. "He's a de'il with a knife. And don't ye over-r-look old Louie and his shotgun."

"Yuh sure can think of a lot of sweet things, you damn old cockle-burr," groaned Bud.

MacPherson grinned maliciously. "And as for-r-r Miss Nor-r-rah Clarey——"

MacPherson ducked quickly and Bud's boot-heel hit the wall behind him.

"Leave her name out of it!" snapped Bud. "I don't know a blamed thing that happened, Mac."

"Ye'll no deny ye were drunk, will ye?"

"On one drink?" snorted Bud.

"It must ha' been a lar-r-ge one, lad."

MacPherson shook his gray head wonderingly. "Mebbe ye were usin' a washtub, eh?"

Bud shook his head and spat dryly. "My tongue is plum corroded, Mac. What did the inspector say?"

MacPherson shook his head slowly. "What could he say, lad? Ye have disgraced the for-r-ce; so he says. Don't ye know that the Royal Northwest Mounted——?"

"Aw shut up!" wailed Bud. "What don't I know about rules and regulations? Ain't I had 'em fired at my head ever since I dressed myself up like a Royal chinook salmon and swore to never pull a gun except in self defense? I didn't ask yuh for a ruling, you long-faced old leather-knees—I asked yuh what the inspector said."

"I'll not repeat it," declared MacPherson. "He sent McKay out on your detail and told me to sober ye up long enough for-r-r ye to answer a few questions. Dr. Clarey was the one that found ye—him and Joe Burgoyne."

"Yeah?" Bud grimaced and scratched his tousled hair nervously. "Clarey, eh? What was he doin' up there?"

"A man got half killed in a brawl, so he says. Burgoyne came after Dr. Clarey, and they found ye maudling drunk, and with ye was the little Marie, and she was——"

"Aw, shut up," snorted Bud, as he got to his feet. "I'm goin' in and have it over with. If Joe Burgoyne sticks a knife into me I hope it'll be in the stummick; I've no use for that part of me."

Bud kicked the door shut behind him and went to face Inspector Grandon; after which he wrote his resignation. Grandon

had said little during the session. Bud denied everything except taking the drink of liquor, but the evidence was all against him.

But just now Bud was not worrying about his discharge nor about disgracing the force; he was thinking about little Norah Clarey. She was a proud little brown-eyed miss, with raven tresses. Black Irish, MacPherson called her. And Bud's whole future was built around Norah Clarey, whether she knew it or not. Now, he knew that she had heard from her father of what he had done, and, if he had not misjudged her, she would never speak to him again. All of which caused Bud to have a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, along with the rest of his internal misery. The fact that both Burgoyne and old Louis Beaudet desired his scalp did not worry Bud in the least.

Old Louis was the proprietor of the store at Eagle Nest, the R. N. W. M. P. headquarters. There was little more than the store and the buildings used by the Mounted, but old Louis did a fair business. Mrs. Beaudet was a Cree squaw, very fat and very indifferent.

Eagle's Nest was too far South for Louie to get any of the fur trade, but the outlying cattle ranches, prospectors, etc., gave him a fair trade. But Louie was the type of Northern trader, canny as a Scot, but caring little beyond his immediate needs.

Marie was a little, black-eyed thing, adored above everything by old Louie, whose gray beard swept almost to his waist and whose whisper was almost a roar. He was a typical old French-Canadian, quick

to answer, quick to forgive and with the strength of a grizzly bear.

Bud could see the front of the store from where he stood on the headquarters steps. Directly across from him was the barracks building, and as Bud glanced that way a tall, rangy policeman came out of the building and crossed toward him. He came in close before he spoke.

"What did the inspector have to say, Conley?"

"I didn't listen much," grinned Bud, "but I got enough to know that he didn't need me any longer, Henderson."



"And you resigned?"

"Well," drawled Bud, "I didn't want to disappoint him."

"That's too bad," sighed Henderson.

"Don't bawl about it," begged Bud. "'F there's anythin' I hate it's t' see a policeman cryin'. I reckon I can bear m' burden."

Henderson smiled. He had been Bud's bunkie and liked Bud, in spite of the fact that Bud laughed at the traditions of the Royal Mounted. Henderson was heart and soul in the service.

"Going to leave this country, Conley?" he asked.

"I—reckon—so—mebbe."

Henderson glanced toward Beaudet's store and stepped in closer to Bud. "Keep your eyes open, Conley. Beaudet is half crazy and Burgoyne is as venomous as a snake. Dr. Clarey has been trying to talk sense into both of them, but I don't think he has done much good."

"Henderson, do you think I got that girl drunk?"

"I don't want to, Conley."

"Then yuh do," said Bud quickly, "but it don't make no never mind."

He turned, as though to walk away from Henderson, but stopped. Two horses were coming down the street; two saddled horses, without riders, and one of the saddles had turned and was under the horse's belly, greatly impeding its progress.

"That is McKay's horse—that roan!" exclaimed Henderson, naming the trooper who had replaced Bud. "The other belongs to Cree George, McKay's packer. I wonder what has gone wrong."

They caught the horses and led them up to the front of the headquarters. Bud removed the saddles, while Henderson reported it to Grandon. An examination showed that neither horse had been injured.

"Broke loose and came back," was Grandon's comment.

"Which don't fit the case at all," declared Bud. "McKay always uses a tie-rope and so does the Injun."

Grandon looked curiously at Bud. "Are tie-ropes unbreakable?" he asked, a trifle vexed.

"No," Bud shook his head slowly, "but it ain't noways reasonable t' suppose that both of them horses would break loose in such a way as t' leave their ropes; and a tie-rope don't usually break in the neck-loop. Ain't neither horse got a rope nor a rope-burn. Nawsir, them two brones were untied."

"What do you think, Henderson?" asked Grandon.

"I think that Conley is right, sir."

"Possibly. You will go at once to Kingsburg and try to get in communication with McKay, Henderson."

Henderson snapped a salute, whirled on his heel and started for the stables. Bud turned his back on Grandon and began rolling a cigarette.

"Do yuh know what I think?" asked Bud slowly.

Grandon seemed to have little interest in what Bud thought, and did not reply.

"I think that Kingsburg is a hell of a place to send one officer, Grandon."

"Yes?" Grandon's voice held a trifle of a sneer, "but McKay does not drink."

"Then he won't get off as cheaply as I did."

"What do you mean, Conley?"

"I mean that there's somethin' queer about that danged place. A week ago I seen somethin' that I never reported to you, Grandon. I was comin' down past there at night and I looked it over from that knoll back of town. I seen at least twenty men go into Magee's place.

"It kinda struck me as bein' queer; so I rode down and went in. I found Magee and one Injun in there. Magee offered me a drink of hooch, but I didn't take it. There was at least twenty men went in there, and I found two."

"I can hardly credit that statement, Conley."

"Hell, you ain't got nothin' on me," grinned Bud.

"You knew that Magee had a stock of liquor?"

"So did you," retorted Bud. "You know damn well that Magee is responsible for most all of the liquor that comes into this district, but you can't nail him with it. You send one man in there to buck that whole bunch. Don't you know that every

smuggler, rustler, bootlegger is on Magee's side? What can one man do?

"You swell out your chest and imagine that the R. N. W. M. P. is all powerful, don'tcha? They ain't. A red coat ain't got a Chinaman's chance in

Kingsburg. I know Magee and his outfit. He told me that I was wastin' m' time tryin' t' put the deadwood on him, and that, if I'd quit the force, he'd show



me how to make more money than the force ever paid anybody."

Grandon's eyes fairly snapped with anger, but he knew down deep in his heart that Bud was right. Their efforts against Magee had been dismal failures, but he did hate to be told in such plain language. Without a word he turned and went back into the house.

"I reckon his hide ain't as thick as I thought it was," mused Bud. "And I didn't say 'sir' to him once."

He stepped off the porch and headed straight for Beaudet's store. Bud was not the kind that waited for trouble to come to him. His mind was a total blank as to what he had done after taking that one drink, but he felt sure that he had nothing to do with the plight of little Marie Beaudet. He knew that it had been a frame-up, but just why they had included the half-breed girl in it he had no idea. Magee was responsible for the doping, and Bud felt sure that Magee had done it to disgrace him with the Mounted and get him out of the way.

Louis Beaudet and Dr. Clarey were standing near the center of the room, talking softly, while Joe Burgoyne sat on a counter beyond them, staring at the floor. Bud stopped near old Louis, who looked up at him.

"You?" said Louie hoarsely. "You come here—you?"

He made a move, as though to reach for Bud, but the doctor grasped him by the arm.

"Softly, me old friend," he begged.

Came the sudden creak of the rough counter and Joe Burgoyne, the half-breed, flung himself straight at Bud, a knife in his hand. Burgoyne was only about ten feet away, and his spring was like that of



a panther, but Bud was not caught napping.

Swiftly he side-stepped just in time to avoid Joe's rush, and as Joe flashed past him, Bud hooked him across the ankles with his foot, sending the half-breed spinning against the counter across the room.

The fight was all taken out of Joe. His long-bladed knife had flipped out of his

hand and skidded under the counter—and Joe was not a bare-handed fighter. He swore softly and felt of his face, which had come into rasping contact with the rough counter.

"If I didn't feel sorry for yuh, I'd tie yuh in a knot and leave yuh to starve," declared Bud.

"Sorry?" Old Louie started forward. "You sorry?"

"Yeah," nodded Bud.

"W'at you sorry for, policeman?"

"I ain't no policeman now," said Bud. "I'm fired."

It took Louie several moments to digest this bit of information.

"So? Yo' not be de policeman now, eh? Noting to keep me from kill you now, eh?" he asked finally.

"Nobody but me. Mebbe I'll object."

Bud was in just the right mood to battle everyone in Eagle's Nest. Joe got up slowly, holding to the counter, while Dr. Clarey still clung to Louie's arm, talking soothingly.

Someone was coming into the store, and Bud turned to see Norah Clarey. She stopped and looked at Bud, and her dark eyes were filled with pain. She turned and looked at Joe. He tried to smile, but it was more of a smirk. Then she ignored Bud and spoke directly to Louie and her father.

"I have heard of the swift justice of the North, but it seems to have been only idle talk."

"W'at you mean?" asked Louie.

"You would let this man stay here, after what he has done?"

"He shall not stay," declared Joe firmly.

"You better run along and find your knife, Breed," said Bud.

"Breed!" exploded Joe. "You'll pay for—"

Bud whirled and started toward Joe, who got swiftly out of the way by vaulting the counter.

"I say he shall not stay!" roared old Louie.

"Aw, don't roar about it!" snapped Bud.

"Ain't a feller got any right to a defense? The Mounted kicked me out without any argument. But I don't mind. The only time a king means anythin' to me is in a poker game.

"I expect to leave this place. There ain't nothin' for me here—now," Bud's voice was pitched lower. "But I'll be damned if anybody is goin' to run me out. Nobody asks me if I done this."

Norah started to speak, but the doctor motioned her to silence. Clarey was a sour-faced old Irish doctor, very strong in his likes and dislikes, but with a heart of gold that he tried to conceal from the world.

"Conley, my lad," he said, trying to force his voice to be gruff, "perhaps we've been a bit too quick, but the evidence is against ye; so heavily against ye that we've given no thought to your defense. Have ye any?"

Bud shook his head and grinned at the doctor.

"Nope. I don't know a danged thing about it. What is there against me, except that I was found with the little girl?"

Louie Beaudet started forward, but the doctor blocked him again.

"Marie see you!" exploded Louie angrily.

"She seen me?" Bud scratched his head wonderingly.

"She don't know what happened," explained the doctor. "She says she was coming from my cabin. It was a bit after dark. A man grasped her and something struck her on the head. She has a faint memory of someone giving her a drink of strong liquor, and in an interval of half-consciousness she saw the scarlet jacket of the Mounted."

"And h'every man of de force be here at de pos', except you!" exclaimed Louie, shaking with anger. "You are de man!"

"And we were found together this morning, eh?"

"Pierre Ravalli was bad cut in a fight," said Joe, "and I'm come here for de doctor. When we go back we find you beside de road."

Dr. Clarey nodded sadly. "That is true."

"Did Ravalli die?" asked Bud.

"He's not hurt so bad," said Joe quickly. "I leave de doctor with you, while I go after wagon to bring you back, and I find that Pierre is much better."

"Was Marie hurt much?" asked Bud.

"Not badly," replied the doctor. "The blow on her head caused a bad swelling, but she is very ill today from the shock."

For several moments no one spoke, and then the doctor said softly, "And she was to marry Joe Burgoyne next week."

Bud turned and looked at Joe, who had come back between the counters and was leaning an elbow on a pile of colored blankets.

"And now he won't marry her, eh?" queried Bud.

Joe's eyes flashed to Louie Beaudet, and then he looked away. It was evident that Joe was not going to keep his part of the marriage compact. Old Louie bowed his head and turned toward the rear of the room. The disgrace of it was too much for the old man to face them now.

Joe turned away, too, as though to leave the store, but Bud caught him by the shoulder and whirled him around.

"You won't marry her, eh?" questioned Bud. "Your honor is so damn clean that she ain't good enough for you now. Listen to me, you breed coyote." Bud grasped Joe by both shoulders and shoved him back against the counter. "It was no fault of hers that this thing happened. I don't know her very well, and you know as well as I do that I never harmed her. But by God, if you don't marry her, I will!"

Joe clawed backward for support, as Bud shook him violently.

"You heard what I said, didn't yuh?" asked Bud.

Joe shook himself together and tried to edge away, but Bud blocked him.

"Well," Joe shrugged his shoulders, "you might ask her; mebbe she be glad to take you—now."

The sneering words were hardly out of Joe's mouth before Bud smashed him full in the face. It was a punch with every ounce of Bud's muscled body behind it, and Joe went down backward, slithering his shoulders against the counter as he fell.

For a moment it seemed that Bud was going to follow up the blow, but the doctor sprang in front of him. The blow had landed a trifle too high for a complete knockout, but Joe's face was a sight to behold as he got to his feet. For a moment he steadied himself and then staggered straight out of the door.

"I'm sorry you did that, Conley," said the doctor.

"Y'betcha!" grunted Bud. "I should have used an ax."

"It does not help matters," sighed the doctor sadly. "It will not help Marie Beaudet, and will only make you an enemy of Joe Burgoyne."



Norah had moved in beside old Louie and now they turned and went out through the door that led to the Beaudet living quarters. Bud looked after Norah, but she did not turn her head.

"You will leave here soon?" questioned the doctor.

"Yeah," nodded Bud. "I reckon I'll throw in with the bunch at Kingsburg. I'm just ornery enough to make good up there with that layout. I'm kinda curious t' know more about the kind of hootch Magee sells. She sure makes a feller throw a peculiar fit."

Bud turned and walked out of the door. The sun had just gone down and it would soon be dark. A big bunch of thunder-clouds were piling up in the east, which presaged a storm within the hour.

Bud sauntered down to the barracks and went to his room. His old bed-roll was there, and wrapped inside it was the outfit he had worn into the country. In a few moments he had divested himself of his soiled uniform and dressed in his old cowboy garb.

His battered old sombrero felt more comfortable than the stiff-brim service hat, and he fairly luxuriated in the feel of his old blue shirt and colorless mackinaw coat. He wrote a note to Henderson and pinned it on the sleeve of his discarded uniform coat. Then he buckled on his own belt and gun, took his slicker and bed-roll under his arm and started for the stables. He was all cowboy once more.

Bud owned his own horse and no one contested his right to saddle up and ride away. It was already dark and behind him came the faint muttering of thunder; so he put on his slicker, drew his sombrero tighter on his head and mentally dared the storm to do its worst. About a mile out of town he left the road and took an old pack-trail, which led in a roundabout way to Kingsburg.

CHAPTER II

IN DEFIANCE OF THE LAW

IT WAS about midnight when Henderson walked up to the post, leading his horse, on which was roped two bodies—McKay and Cree George, the Indian packer. Inspector Grandon, white of face and only half awake, said nothing, as he helped Henderson carry the two bodies into headquarters.

"They were in the middle of the street, sir," reported Henderson wearily. "I suppose everyone was afraid to touch them.

McKay's hat and coat were missing. No one in the town will talk to me about it, but no one interfered with me. McKay's gun was lying beside him, but his handcuffs are missing."

"Do you think he was shot while starting back with a prisoner, Henderson?"

"Looks like it, sir. They would have no object in taking the handcuffs. The bodies were lying close together."

Old MacPherson came in, spluttering, half-asleep, and examined the two bodies carefully.

MacPherson had grown old in the service—old enough to have been retired—but he had induced Inspector Grandon to take him into the Eagle's Nest post, where he had become a general utility man.

"The poor de'il's never had a chance," he muttered. "McKay, ye fine lad, they got ye cold, so they did." He squinted up at Grandon, a suspicious amount of moisture around his old eyes. "Who did it, do ye know?"

"Kingsburg holds the answer, MacPherson."

"Aye, and she'll hold it tight," nodded MacPherson. "The de'il's own brood they are. Weel, there's na use of wailin' o'er cold clay, I suppose." He got wearily to his feet and shook his head sadly, as he left the room.

"Do you know if Conley is still around here, sir?" asked Henderson.

"I don't know," replied Grandon. "Conley and Burgoyne had a fight in Beaudet's place last evening, and I think Conley handled him roughly. You don't think that Conley had anything to do with this, do you?"

"Not at all, sir," quickly. "Conley and McKay were good friends, and beside that, Conley couldn't have done this. I was just wondering what Conley was talking about when he was brought in. He kept muttering about missing men, sir."

"Drunken hallucinations," Grandon sighed deeply. "He spoke to me about it, too. He said it happened a week ago, I think. Said he saw twenty men go into Magee's place, but he only found two in there."

"But Bud was not drunk a week ago, sir," protested Henderson.

"Conley was intimate with Magee," declared Grandon, "I heard it from his own lips. The force is well rid of him. Better go and clean up, Henderson."

"Yes, sir," Henderson saluted and left the room.

Grandon was unable to go back to his bed and leave the two bodies alone; so he wrapped himself in a robe and sat down to smoke and think of a plan. Henderson came back and sat down with him.



The talk naturally turned to Kingsburg and Magee.

"Magee has made his boasts that the Mounted have never taken a man out of Kingsburg," said Henderson. "I think that McKay had made an arrest when he was shot."

Grandon nodded thoughtfully. "And I suppose that will happen to any officer who does likewise, Henderson."

"Until Magee and his gang are either run out of the country, or are buried, sir."

"But we cannot do anything without direct evidence, Henderson."

"That is our loss and their protection, sir. I think Conley was partly right. He said there was only one way to wipe out that gang, and that was to go up there, accuse them of being a lot of crooks and then shoot it out with them."

Grandon smiled and shook his head. "Impossible, Henderson."

"Yes, sir, and Magee knows it. He must have a complete spy system, because he knows our every move in advance. I feel sure that this post is carefully watched all the time. McKay felt the same about it, sir; and Conley, too."

"I should not be surprised to know that Conley has joined Magee."

Henderson grinned. "If he ever does—look out, Magee! I know how you feel about Conley's actions, sir; but I believe his story. Magee was afraid of Conley, I think. Conley was the only one of us that might forget his sworn duty. He was a cowpuncher, not an officer. And as far as Marie Beudet was concerned—" Henderson hesitated and shook his head, "Conley would never harm a woman, sir. Why he is head-over-heels in love with Norah Clarey."

Grandon pursed his lips and frowned slightly. "I'm afraid that Conley can never prove his innocence, Henderson. Anyway, it is a breach of the rules for an officer to take a drink of liquor."

The talk drifted to other things, as they waited for daylight, half-dozing in their chairs. The rain pattered steadily on the shake-covered roof and dripped hollowly off the eaves. It was about five o'clock when footsteps grated across the porch, and into the room came Louie Beudet. His face was white above his great beard, and he half-staggered in his stride. In one hand he carried a heavy Colt revolver.

It flashed through the minds of both men that Louie had lost his reason. He was growling deeply in his throat, and waving the gun wildly.

"Whose gun—that?" he roared huskily.

"Hold it still, Beudet!" snapped Grandon.

"Hol' still?" bellowed Louie. "Ba garr, I'm can't hol' her still! Here—you tak'!"

He shoved the gun into Henderson's hands and whirled on Grandon.

"I'm be robbed! Somebody she's br'ak into my safe and tak' h'all de money las' night!"

Louie was shaking with nervousness and wrath and almost pulled Grandon's desk from its moorings.

"What about the gun, Beudet?" asked Grandon.

"De gonn? Ba gar, I'm find her on de floor by my safe!"

Henderson placed the gun on the desk in front of Grandon, who picked it up and looked it over carefully.

"Do you recognize the gun, Henderson?" he asked.

Henderson nodded slowly. "Yes, sir, I have seen it before; it belongs to Bud Conley."

"Bud Conley?" echoed Louie. "She's rob me of ev-eryt'ing, eh? W'at I do now?"

Louie glanced helplessly around and his eyes came to rest on the two blanket-covered bodies.



"That is McKay and Cree George," said Grandon softly. "They were killed yesterday or last night in Kingsburg."

"W'at?" exploded Louie, crossing himself quickly. "Both men dead? *Mon Dieu*, w'y is all dis be done?"

Grandon ignored Louie's question and turned back to Henderson.

"Are you sure that is Conley's gun?"

"Yes, sir. But perhaps someone stole it from him. Wait a moment."

Henderson hurried out of the room and crossed to the barracks. He was hoping against hope that Bud might be there, but he found that Bud's personal things were all gone, and on the sleeve of Bud's service coat he found the note, which read:

So-long, Henderson. I'm pulling out now. Good luck.

Bud.

GRANDON and Louie were crossing toward Beaudet's store as Henderson came out, and he gave the note to Grandon, who read it and handed it back.

They went into the store, where Louie showed them his rifled safe. It was an old-fashioned affair which locked with a key, and the lock had been forced.

"How much money did they get?" asked Grandon.

"Eight hun'ed dollars," wailed Beaudet. "Right here," pointing at the floor in front of the safe, "I find de gonn. Firs' he break my heart and den he break my bank. W'at I do now, eh?"

Grandon shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Beaudet. Where is Joe Burgoyne?"

"Joe she's stay las' night in de old Trentone cabin. *Mon dieu*, w'at a face she's got. I'm t'ink she's be ashame' for to be look upon."

Grandon turned and walked out, with Henderson following him closely.

"It looks like Conley had played the fool again," he told Henderson, "and he has a good chance to get out of the country. Thieves will have to wait until murderers are caught."

Investigation proved that Bud's horse and saddle were gone, but there was no way of telling which way he had gone out of Eagle's Nest. Grandon shook his head and went back to his office. There was little he could do at present.

Henderson was the only man left, and Grandon had learned that one man could do nothing at Kingsburg. The killing of McKay and Cree George and the leaving of the bodies in the street was a direct challenge to the force.

Magee was a brute of a man, crafty, vindictive, suspicious, and he had surrounded himself with men who were no better than himself until Kingsburg had become known as a town of lawlessness.

It was impossible for the law to fasten a single crime upon Magee, yet they knew

that he was responsible for many grave offenses. It was a tough problem that faced Grandon that morning.

Joe Burgoyne sauntered into town and sat down moodily in front of Beaudet's store. He was no longer Joe Burgoyne the debonair. His classical nose had been dented and a split upper lip gave him a continuous sneer. His eyes hinted at a sleepless night and he spat angrily at a few loafing Indians who gazed curiously at him.

His sorrowful reflections were broken by Henderson, who came up and informed him that the inspector wished to have a few words with him.

"What for?" demanded Joe sullenly.

"He'll tell you," said Henderson coldly.

Joe got to his feet and walked slowly toward headquarters. He did not relish a talk with Grandon, but he knew better than to refuse. Henderson followed him in and Grandon motioned him to a chair.

"What you want?" demanded Joe. He was more Indian than white now.

Grandon considered him for several moments.

"Burgoyne, do you know that McKay and Cree George were killed yesterday at Kingsburg?" he finally asked.

Joe nodded quickly. "I hear it talk about today."

"You do not like the police, do you Burgoyne? No need to answer that question. Here is what I want to talk to you about. A white man and an Indian, both wearing the authority of the law, were shot down in the street. The man or men who fired those shots must pay the penalty of the crime.

"I can bring enough men in here to wipe Kingsburg off the map, but the innocent would suffer with the guilty. If I can find the names of the guilty men, we will go there and take them away. But no man in the employ of the police would be able to gather that information, except by accident. You understand?"

Joe nodded and caressed his sore face.

"You know Kingsburg and Magee?"

Joe shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "I go there like de rest."

"You know Magee?"

"Sure—like de rest know him."

"And are you afraid of him—like the rest?"

"Why should I be afraid of Magee?" flashed Joe quickly.

Grandon nodded. "I am glad of that, Burgoyne."

"You blame Magee for shoot policemen?"

"I feel sure he knows who did it."

"What you want from me?" Joe seemed suspicious.



"I want you to go to Kingsburg and find out who killed McKay and Cree George."

Joe shook his head. "I don't want to be killed."

"Nobody will know you are working for me," urged Grandon.

"Nobody know, eh?" Joe's beady eyes half-closed as he leaned back in his chair and considered the proposition. "Mebbe take long time to find out, eh? If police come there, nobody find out, and Joe Burgoyne die quick. You give me t'ree days—mebbe I find out."

"Take your own time," said Grandon visibly relieved, "and no one from the post shall interfere with you."

Joe got to his feet and turned toward the door.

"We could use any information regarding the whereabouts of Bud Conley," added Grandon.

Joe spat angrily and nodded his head, as he went out of the door. Grandon smiled across the room at Henderson.

"Burgoyne has a score to settle with Conley, and I think we may look for some early information."

Henderson nodded and examined the revolver that Louie Beudet had found beside his rifled safe. He had seen it many times. The butt plates were carved from solid bone, showing a steer's head in relief on each plate. There was no question of ownership.

"Why do you suppose he forgot his gun?" queried Grandon.

Henderson placed the gun on the table and shook his head, as he said, "Conley might forget his boots or he might forget every rule of the service, sir; but he'd not forget his gun."

"You think someone stole the gun to throw the guilt on Conley? Ridiculous, Henderson!"

"Yes, sir," said Henderson meekly, which might have meant an answer or an agreement.

CHAPTER III

THE WOOING OF THE HALF-BREED

BUD CONLEY'S disgrace had been an awful blow to Norah Clarey, although she concealed it well. She had known Bud ever since she had come from school in Vancouver to join her father. Norah had been raised in Eagle's Nest, and Bud, with his clear blue eyes, uptilted nose and ready smile had fairly grown into her life. He was different than any man she had ever met. There had been no courtship between them, but both of them seemed to feel that none was needed.

With all of her impulsive soul she tried to hate him for what he had done—tried to, but hardly succeeded. For little Marie she had nothing but sorrow. She was only a slip of a child, to Norah, although there was only a matter of a year or so difference in their ages.

It was inconceivable that Bud Conley would do this thing. But there was the evidence. He had sacrificed his place in the service and disgraced himself with the girl he loved. Norah shook her head and tried to tell herself that Bud was not worth a thought.

She knew that strange things had been done at Kingsburg. Much whisky had been run across the border, and it was an easy sanctuary for outlaws from the States. Dr. Clarey had patched up many a wound at Kingsburg, and shut his lips tight against the questions of the Mounted. He was a moral, law-abiding man, but his practice and patients were sacred to him.

Dr. Clarey had gone to the store and Norah was busy with her housework, when Joe Burgoyne, coming from his talk with the inspector, dismounted at the porch.

Joe had seen the doctor going down the path to Louie Beudet's place, and had waited until he was out of sight before going to the Clarey cabin.

Norah came to the door, carrying her broom and watched Joe tie his horse to a corner of the cabin. Since his encounter with Bud Conley, Joe Burgoyne was far from being the gay half-breed.

His clothes were badly wrinkled, as though he had slept in them, and a scowl twisted his lean face, as he tried to force



the restive horse to lead up close enough to enable him to make the tie.

Norah had never liked Joe Burgoyne. There was something snake-like about him. She really hated to see little Marie marry him, and felt a thrill of satisfaction when Joe had refused, although she detested Joe for his decision.

He turned and saw her standing in the door.

"Ah, I am pleased to see you," he said, and his white teeth flashed in a smile. "I come to see Dr. Clarey."

Norah stepped further out onto the porch and glanced down toward the store.

"Why, he just went down to Beaudet's," she replied. "Didn't you see him?"

Unconsciously she turned and went inside and Joe followed her. Joe's every movement was like that of a panther. Possibly this was an inheritance from his Nez Perce mother.

"No, I don't see him down there?"

Joe shook his head and sat down in one of the rough rockers, while Norah went on about her house-cleaning. Joe watched her closely, as he said, "You got hair like de shadows in La Clede cliffs."

Norah stopped sweeping and looked at him.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You never seen de shadow of La Clede cliffs? De soft black and purple—more like clouds. You got hair like it."

Norah snorted visibly and continued sweeping. She did not seem to care for Joe's compliments.

"You much sad, eh?" queried Joe softly. "I'm sorry."

Norah looked at him, but continued her work.

"Your eyes be sad." Joe was very sympathetic now. "You make mistake in one man and now you be very sad, eh?"

Norah flushed slightly, but did not reply.

"You must not be sad," continued Joe. "Why you don't smile and drive de clouds from your eyes? You are de prettiest girl in de worl', and you must not be sad."

It suddenly occurred to Norah that Joe was trying to make love to her, and she was not at all pleased.

"You smile at Joe Burgoyne and he feel proud. Maybe I bring you de nice present, eh? I'm like to do dat."

"You bring me a present?" Norah turned quickly on him. "What about Marie Beaudet?"

Joe laughed softly and shook his head. "Marie? Dat is all past. I want to marry good woman—me."

Norah stared at him for a moment and then pointed toward the door. "Dr. Clarey is down at the store, and I think you had better go down there to see him."

"I wait here for him," declared Joe grinning. "I'm more interest in other things jus' now." He had failed to note the anger in Norah's face and voice.

"You'll not stay here!" Nora's hands tightened around the broom-handle and her face went a shade whiter.

Joe glanced quickly at her and got to his feet. "You not mad at me?" Joe spread his hands in a gesture of despair. "*Mon dieu*, I am sorry!"

"You had better go now," said Norah coldly.

Joe turned toward the door, but did not go out.

"You don't like me, eh? I want to be nice to you, but you send me away. Is it because I am quarter-breed? Mebbe you like best de white man, who is de thief? No, I am sorry I say dat, mam'selle—very sorry."

Norah had turned away and Joe started to follow her.

"Please don't be mad with me," he begged. "I love you ever since you come here. You no love me, eh? I know."

Joe's voice was so wistful that Norah's anger faded and she turned to him.

"Why don't you go back to Marie?" she asked. "Louie Beaudet is broken-hearted. Marie is a good woman."

Joe laughed bitterly and shook his head. "No, I never go back to her. Good woman, eh? How could she be good woman?"

This time Norah could not hold her temper nor her tongue and Joe retreated out of the door.

"You soulless little rat!" she called him. "You are not even half-a-man! In spite of anything she has ever done, Marie Beaudet is many times too good for you! Now get out of here and stay out!"

Norah slammed the door shut, knocking Joe into Dr. Clarey, who was coming up behind him. The doctor grasped Joe to keep him from falling, but Joe, with a snarling curse, tore away from him, went out to his horse and rode away.

Her father opened the door and almost became a victim of Norah's broom. He stepped back quickly, but she dropped the broom and laughed hysterically.

"I thought he was coming back," she explained. "The little snake tried to make love to me."

"Now, would ye believe that!" exploded

the doctor. "That—well, now, it's all right. He has a grand taste, so he has, Norah; and I give him that much credit. But I have some bad news for ye. McKay and his Indian were killed in Kingsburg, and last night someone broke into Louie's safe and stole all his money."

Norah stared at him and her hands clutched at her apron. "Jimmy McKay and his Indian killed?"

"Aye. Henderson brought them in last night."

"And Louie was robbed, you say?"

"He was. They took everything in his safe."

Norah stared out of the open door. She had known McKay for a long time.

"And it's worse and more of it," volunteered the doctor. "Bud Conley's gun was on the floor beside the safe."

Norah turned and looked dumbly at him. "Bud's gun?"

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Bud's gun?"

"Aye. Henderson identified it, Norah. Ah, I'm sorry."

She bit her lips and shook her head. "You don't need to be sorry for me, daddy. Be sorry for poor Bud Conley."

"Aye, that's true. He left a note for Henderson, saying that he was leaving. Things are in a bad shape around here, my dear. The inspector's face looks like it was petrified, Angus MacPherson is swearing incessantly and old Louie is crying into his beard. Aye, there's a deal of sorrow.

"And now Joe Burgoyne is blaspheming because you won't love him," added the doctor after a moment. "Sure, this sorrow is contagious. There's no doubt of the truth that single misfortunes never come alone."

Norah shut her lips tightly and turned back to her sweeping. The doctor studied her for a moment, shook his head and crossed the room to his desk.

CHAPTER IV

A CAPTIVE COWBOY

BUD CONLEY'S awakening was painful. His mind was hazy and his eyes seemed badly out of focus, as he stared up at the ceiling of the log cabin. He tried to moisten his lips with his tongue, but it was like leather against leather.

"Gee cripes, I must 'a' been awful drunk," he said aloud. "I feel like I'd been corroded." He reflected for a moment, and then added, "Maybe it's my iron

constitution that has begun to rust. Whew, what a flavor I have in my system!"

After considerable effort he managed to hitch himself over to the wall, where he braced himself and looked around. He was in a small cabin, windowless and with one door. The cabin had evidently been built for something other than a place to live.

Bud swallowed painfully and felt of his head. Then he began to remember a few things. He had ridden up to the front of Magee's place at Kingsburg in a driving rain and had tied his horse. As he ducked under the hitchrack, he remembered seeing someone near him, and then a heavy weight had descended upon his head. From that time he had no recollection.

"Whactha know about that?" he grunted aloud, feeling of his aching head. "I must 'a' been crowned queen of Kingsburg. They've sure handed me two wonderful receptions in that town."

His clothes were still wet and muddy and the upper part of his body was blood-stained from the cut on his head, which had stopped bleeding. His cartridge belt and gun were gone.

He managed to get to his feet and stagger over to the door. It was fastened from the outside and was as solid as the four walls.

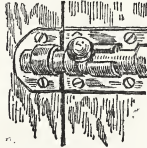
"Well, they sure respect a Montana cowpuncher enough t' lock me in a place where I'll stay put," he observed. He circled the walls carefully, but nothing less than an axe or dynamite would ever make an impression on those heavy logs.

"She's so danged tight yuh couldn't even pour water out of it," he declared to himself, "so I reckon I'll stay right in here, like a nice little boy."

He sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall, just as the door swung open and closed quickly behind two Indians. One of them carried a blackened pot and both had rifles, with which they kept Bud covered. They were both evil-faced bucks, seemingly half-drunk.

Bud started to his feet, but one of them shoved a rifle against him, grunted a warning and Bud sat down.

"How's all yore folks?" asked Bud pleasantly.



The one with the pot motioned toward the receptacle and said thickly, "Eat."

"I don't have to, if I don't want to, do I?" queried Bud.

"No kumtuks," said the other, signifying in the Chinook jargon that he did not understand, and they backed toward the door.

Bud was unable to tell what tribe they belonged to, but felt that, from their use of the Chinook jargon, that they were renegades from tribes across the border, although the border tribes of British Columbia spoke the jargon.

"Wait a moment. Let us talk, friends," said Bud in the same strange tongue, which he could speak.

He thought he might get them into conversation and find out why he was imprisoned, but one of them shook his head and said coldly, "No talk. Not friends."

As they opened the door, Bud spat at them, "*Mahkh mokst, hum opoots!*"

One Indian started to lift his gun, but the other spoke gutturally and shoved him outside. They barred the door quickly behind them.

"Well," observed Bud sadly, "tellin' that pair of skunks to get out quick didn't get me anythin' that yuh could see with yore naked eye. As far as knowin' anythin', I'm right where I left off."

He examined the kettle of stew, but his stomach rebelled. The kettle was none too clean, and its contents far from appetizing. Bud was still nauseated from the blow on his head, and he wanted a drink of water.

"Skunks they were," he reflected, "but I should have kept the information away from them long enough to beg a drink of water. Now, why am I a prisoner?"

But there was no lead for him to work on. He had always been friendly to the Indians. Why had Monk Magee given him the doped whisky, and why did Marie Beaudet figure in his troubles, he wondered.

A search of his pockets showed that his captors had overlooked his knife and several matches. The cabin was chinked from the outside with strips of wood, but he was able to work the large blade of the knife between the strips.

It was a slow process, but after a time he was able to gouge out a place large enough to enable him to peer into the adjoining room. It was empty, as far as he could see, and was without a window. He attacked the opposite side of the room, but

was unable to work his knife blade between the strips.

In a spot above the doors there appeared to be two logs which had never been chinked. The light space was fairly large and Bud considered the possibilities of getting up there for a look outside. The logs offered little surface for climbing, but after much labor and several ineffectual attempts he managed to hang up there long enough to peer out between the logs.

In front of the cabin was a fairly heavy growth of brush and trees, some of which had been cut away. The rain was beginning to fall again—another dreary drizzle—which presaged a wet night.

Bud dropped back and fell to a sitting position on the floor. He was still a little weak and very thirsty, but grinned with satisfaction, as he began slicing splinters off the exposed chinking of the cabin.

It was slow work, but Bud was not in a hurry, and by the time that the light failed he had collected a goodly supply of the pitch kindling, which he piled against the door.

He sat down and rested a while, waiting until it was very dark. The rain was coming down heavier now and the interior of the cabin was growing colder.

Then came a scraping noise in the next room. Bud managed to find the peep-hole



in the wall, which he had made with his knife. There was a candle burning in the room, beside what appeared to be a hole in the floor.

A closer survey showed that the floor of that room was composed of hand-hewn timbers, known as puncheon, and that some of them had been removed, making a hole in the center of the room.

As he peered in he saw a man come out of the hole, carrying a heavy keg, which he rolled against the wall. Then he went back and helped another man remove a keg from the same place. They talked in an undertone for several moments, and then replaced the puncheon.

Each of them took a keg and carried it beyond Bud's line of vision. Then a door creaked open and he heard them shut it from the outside. They were talking again and their voices were plainer.

One of them said, "They can't pack all

this in tonight, unless they want to take a chance and take it in the wagon."

The other replied in too low a tone for Bud to hear, but their voices died away in the distance.

"So this is where Monk Magee keeps his hootch cached, eh?" mused Bud. "Sort of a supply station, I reckon. Well, it's none of my business."

He went over to the door and touched a lighted match to the pile of splinters, which were heavily impregnated with pitch. Inside of a minute the cabin was lighted with the glow, and the black smoke was seeping out through the chinking.

Somewhere a man yelled a warning, but Bud was unable to tell whether it was a white man or an Indian. The flames roared against the seasoned pine of the door, and the room was filling with smoke.

Then came an Indian's voice, crying a warning. Bud sprang to the wall and climbed like a monkey, clinging with tooth and nail to the rough logs. Sideways he moved until he was directly over the door, where the stifling smoke boiled out of the unchinked logs.

Came the sound of running feet, a jumble of Indian gutturals and the door was flung open. The smoke swirled out of the door, and enabled Bud to see the two Indians, who had kicked the fire aside and were peering in through the smoke. As they moved further in, holding their guns ready, Bud dropped like a plummet, feet-first onto the broad back of one of them.

The Indian grunted hoarsely, dropped forward from the crushing weight and Bud pitched sideways into the other Indian, knocking him backward and out of the cabin by the sheer weight of his attack.

They went down into the mud, rolling over and over. The Indian had lost his rifle, and most of his breath had been knocked from his body, but he clawed wildly at Bud, fighting like a wild animal.

But Bud was not idle. He was schooled in the rough-and-tumble methods of battle and he mauled the Indian without mercy. The other Indian, still half-stunned, recovered his rifle and came to his companion's assistance.

It was impossible for him to shoot at Bud, without taking a big chance of hurting his companion; so he danced around them, trying to strike Bud with the butt of his rifle. Behind them the fire blazed merrily, as the pine logs of the cabin picked up the flames, and the scene was well lighted.

Bud's attention was centered on his im-

mediate opponent, who was giving him plenty of battle, but he was not losing sight of the fact that his head was in imminent danger of being crushed at any moment.

Over and over they rolled, each striving for a damaging hold, but both fighting silently. Then Bud got a grip on the Indian's throat, and their heads were close together. A glancing blow from the gun-butt partly paralyzed Bud's shoulder, but he clung to his choking grip on the buck's throat. The other Indian was striking oftener now, as though taking a long chance, but Bud was watching.

The fight was slackening now. Bud's strangle-hold had caused the Indian's body to grow limp and his hands relaxed. Suddenly Bud threw himself away, as though trying to disentangle himself, but as the gun butt swished downward he jerked the Indian almost over him.

Came the dull thud of hardwood on yielding bone.

Quick as a cat, Bud flung his opponent aside, rolled over and sprang to his feet. The other Indian yelled and sprang after him, rifle upraised, thinking that Bud was

about to escape, but instead of running away, Bud dug his toes into the soft dirt and came back like a charging moose.

His shoulder crashed into the Indian's midriff and the rifle went spinning away. The shock threw Bud sideways, and he sprawled across the body of the second Indian, where he lay for several moments, gasping from the collision. But the other Indian did not get up; he was completely knocked out.

Bud got to his feet and looked around. The wound on his head had opened again and his face was cut and bruised from the fight. His shoulder ached from the blow and he felt dizzy and weak, but lost no time in securing one of the rifles. He removed a belt of cartridges from one of the Indians and fastened it around his waist.

The cabin was blazing merrily now and nothing could save it. Suddenly there came a shout from behind the building. Beyond the light of the burning cabin every thing was a black pall, but Bud raced headlong into it, trusting to luck to strike a trail.

As he struck the brush tangle, almost



beyond the light from the fire, he looked back and saw several forms running around the cabin. They halted at the Indians, talking loudly, but Bud waited no longer. Gripping his rifle tightly, he started running into the darkness of the trees.

Then he stopped suddenly. From just beyond him came the unmistakable creak and rattle of a wagon, and the sound of a man's voice, talking excitedly.

"Whoa!" The wagon stopped.

"The whole damn thing's on fire!"

"Well, whatcha goin' to do—stop here?"

"Danged right. We don't know who's there."

Came the sound of them getting down from the wagon.

"Goin' to tie the team?"

"Naw, they'll stand. Come on."

The two men passed very close to Bud and went on toward the fire. Bud chuckled to himself and felt his way over to the team. Cautiously he lit a match and looked around. It was an old lumber-wagon, with a high box, and the team was a shaggy pair of gray bronchos.

Bud noted that there was room to turn the outfit around, so he lost no time in climbing to the seat and gathering up the lines. He had no idea of where he was, and in the darkness and rain he could not even see his team, but he trusted to them to keep the road.

Cautiously he turned around, bumping over rocks, down timber and low brush, but managed to get headed the opposite direction and spoke sharply to the team. It was like heading into a black void, but the grays responded with a will.

CHAPTER V

A GUIDING LIGHT

BUD soon found that there was little road. It was more like a cross-country, hit-or-miss proposition. The rain drifted into his face and he clung to the seat with both hands, but the team kept going steadily in spite of the fact that the wagon was never on an even keel.

There was nothing to show Bud where he was; nothing but the solid wall of blackness, out of which came the gusty spurts of rain, which drenched him and sent a chill racing up and down his spine.

"Gonna get down and walk pretty soon," he told himself, slapping his arms dismally and almost falling off the wagon. "Better stayed in that cabin where it was dry."

He wondered in a dull sort of a way

whether the Indians were dead and whether he was being pursued by the men who owned the wagon and team. For hours, it seemed to him, he drifted ahead, jolting over rocks, surging in and out of hollows.

Then he saw a light. It was a tiny flicker, which glowed for a moment and went out. He stopped the team. A light might mean a habitation, and Bud was badly in need of a habitation. But he could not see the light now. Prompted by a sudden idea, he got off the wagon and walked back, thinking that perhaps he had driven beyond the angle of the light.

Finally he picked it up again, but when he moved back toward the wagon it disappeared. He seemed to be in a more open country now, although it was difficult to tell just what the place did look like.

He stumbled back to the wagon and deliberated on his next move. He managed to light a match, which showed him that he was still on the road; so he led the team at right-angles, clearing the road and tied them to a jack-pine.

Taking his rifle he went back to where he could see the tiny light, and struck boldly across country toward it.

And he found the going very bad indeed. He could not see the ground, and, after he had picked himself up for the fifth time, he declared aloud that it was surely the rocky road to Dublin. His shoulder and his many bruises ached and he was chilled from the rain.

But he kept the light in sight, in spite of the underbrush, logs and rocks, which tripped and bruised him. He lost his rifle and had a difficult time finding it.

At times the rain descended in such torrents that the light was obliterated, but he stood still until it slackened. He was used to the rain now. Every muscle and joint in his body ached, but he gritted his teeth and laughed loudly at the misery within him.

Finally he reached the light, or close to it, and stopped. To all appearances it was a lantern, which was seemingly suspended in the air. He was standing in a little thicket of jack-pines within possibly six feet of the light.

As his eyes became more accustomed to it, he seemed to catch a faint glow of the light against rocks.

"Looks like it was against a hill," he reflected, as the downpour slackened for a moment. "That lantern is hangin' in a break in the hill."

He was about to push forward to investigate, when he heard a faint noise like

something walking in the mud. He drew back. The sound was louder now. Then, out of the storm, came some bulky-looking objects, which, when they came into the



glow of the lantern, proved to be two men and a horse.

They stopped, almost in reach of Bud, blocking him from the lantern, and began unpacking the horse. Neither of them spoke until their unpacking was done. The horse moved slightly ahead, and Bud saw one of them, the one on the further side, pick up a keg, balance it on his shoulder and disappear under the lantern.

"Put out the light when you come in," ordered the man with the keg, and the one at the horse grunted a reply. As he lifted the keg, Bud shortened his grip on his rifle and swung it forward in a short arc.

The man collapsed without a sound and the heavy keg struck the ground with a thud. Bud grasped the lantern and examined him quickly. He was wearing a checked mackinaw coat and a moth-eaten fur cap. Swiftly Bud stripped these off and put them on himself. Then he hoisted the keg on his own shoulder, stumbled over to the entrance to what proved to be a tunnel, jerked the light from the lantern and went stumbling in through the darkness.

He had no idea of what was ahead of him, and swore at himself for being a fool, but kept on going. He had left his rifle outside and was unarmed. As near as he could tell he had gone about a hundred feet, when he turned a corner and saw the light shining through an open door.

A babble of voices came to him, the reek of liquor and stale tobacco smoke; but he ducked his head and went straight through the doorway and into a room, which was partly filled with men and entirely filled with conversation.

Someone cheered loudly and the keg was taken from him by willing hands. He was jostled aside and came to a stop with his back against a wall. Then he lifted his head and looked around cautiously.

He was in a room about twenty feet wide by forty feet long; a low-ceiled place, with heavy, rough beams. On one side was a rough, bar-like counter, on which

the two kegs had been placed, and just beyond one end of the bar was a rough stairway, leading up to what appeared to be a trapdoor.

At the further end of the room was a small platform, on which sat a fiddler and a man with an accordion. Nearly in the center of the room a crowd of men were packed around a card-table, over which hung a big, oil lamp, with huge circular shade. Over the bar was another, smaller lamp.

The room was foggy with smoke and there seemed to be no ventilation. The kegs of liquor seemed to be the center of interest just now; so Bud moved over toward the crowd at the card-table, taking pains to conceal his face.

Bud recognized several of the men around the table. There was Culp, a horse-thief from the Sweetgrass range; "Goat" Marlin, who got his nickname from his method of fighting; "Bull" Cook, who had served two years in the penitentiary for cattle rustling.



"A sweet aggregation," reflected Bud, and hoped that none of these men might recognize him. Cook was very drunk and seemed anxious to get into the game, but the seats were all filled.

He leaned heavily on another man and made drunken remarks about the players. Bud moved in closer to him. Cook's belt and holster had shifted around until the gun was hanging almost directly behind him, and by leaning in close and grasping the bottom of the holster, Bud was able to remove the gun without anyone seeing him.

Cook straightened up, still arguing, but did not notice the absence of weight on his belt. He yipped joyfully and staggered toward the bar. Bud concealed the gun in his mackinaw pocket and grinned softly.

The music started again and one of the cowboys essayed a drunken jig. Suddenly a bell tinkled and the music stopped. The cowboy continued his dance until someone grabbed him and forced him to stop. The room was as quiet as a tomb.

After a pause of about fifteen seconds the bell tinkled again and the tension was relaxed.

"A signal from upstairs," observed Bud. "Now, what is upstairs?"

A man beside him was talking.

"Monk she's scare h'all de time. Ho, ho, ho! H'every time somet'ing move—Monk she's ring de bell."

Another man laughed harshly, as he said, "I reckon we don't need to worry about them red-bellies. There's only two of 'em left in Eagle's Nest, and one of them is the inspector."

One of the men in the game looked up at them.

"The killin' of that policeman and Indian in the street was a damn fool thing to do," he declared. "You can buck the Mounties just so long, but they'll git yuh in the end."

"W'at you tink?" grunted the Frenchman. "Yo' t'ink de boss want Monk to go to de jail?"

"He might at least 'a' moved the bodies. Yuh can't bluff the Mounties thataway. Killin' 'em only makes the rest that much worse. I don't like it."

"I'm t'ink de boss know what she want."

Bud averted his head while he thought over what he had heard. McKay and the Indian had arrested Magee and were killed in the street by the boss. Who was the boss, he wondered? If Monk Magee was ringing that warning bell, this must be Magee's place. Then it suddenly dawned upon Bud that this room was beneath Magee's hotel at Kingsburg.

This was where those men had gone that day they had disappeared so mysteriously. No wonder he failed to find them.

"And I didn't have sense enough to keep away from the danged place," he reflected bitterly. "I'm in a danged good place to lose my scalp."

The crowd at the bar were laughing loudly, and Bud turned toward them. One of the kegs had been decorated with a red coat. A bottle had been placed atop the keg, and on the bottle dangled a service hat of the Mounted police.

And to this effigy of a Royal Northwest Mounted Policeman they were drinking vile toasts. The coat and hat were stiff with mud, but never before had they meant so much to Bud Conley, the Montana cow-puncher.

For a moment his eyes narrowed and he surged ahead, gripping the pistol in his pocket. He was going to show this howling mob of outlaws what it meant to insult the service. But he stopped. It suddenly dawned upon him that he was not a member of the force any longer. Why

should he take up a challenge for the Mounted?

The noise at the bar stopped. Bud turned his head. Coming down the stairs was Joe Burgoyne, the half-breed, grinning widely. Bud moved further back against the wall, his hand still gripping the gun.

The men called loudly to Joe, who answered with a flash of his white teeth and a wave of his hand. A man shoved a cup of the raw liquor into his hands, while the others crowded around him.

"W'at about de police, Joe?" called one of the men at the card table.

The half-breed threw back his head and laughed mockingly.

"De police! Such a lot of fools! Ha, ha, ha! Listen," Joe sobered quickly, and the place was stilled.

"Today, or rather las' night, I am appointed to find out who kill one officer and one Injun. Everybody look out, because Joe Burgoyne is police spy."

A roar of laughter greeted this statement, in which Joe joined heartily. Then his roving eye caught sight of the effigy on the bar and he simulated sudden exasperation.

"See?" he exploded, pointing at the effigy. "The police lie to poor Joe! They promise to not send any policeman to Kingsburg for three day. Ba gar!" Joe dashed down his cup of liquor. "I'm quit work for the police right now!"

The crowd roared their approval and surged to the bar. Bud knew that Joe was sober and that his keen eyes would search him out quickly. There was no question but what Joe was in league with Magee's gang, and Bud smiled to himself at the thought of Grandon hiring Joe to spy on his own crowd.

Joe had mounted to the top of the bar and shouted for silence, as he held up a cupful of liquor.

"Listen to Joe Burgoyne!" he called. "Three days no police come to Kingsburg. Three days more and lots of them come. I know the police—me. I have not watched Eagle's Nest all time for not'ing. I am goin' to quit before the police come."

"When they come they find not'ing. I'm give this place to Magee, but he runs



only hootch. Maybe we meet again some place and fool the police again, eh?"

The crowd roared and lifted their cups. Questions were flung at Joe, as to why he was closing his place of business, but Joe ignored them.

"Drink a toast to Joe Burgoyne," he invited. "Tonight the liquor is free. I make money for you; I get you lots of whisky. Now drink toast to Joe Burgoyne and his new girl."

The crowd drank noisily.

"W'at name, that girl?" yelled one of them.

"Name?" Joe laughed. "Bimeby be Burgoyne, Pierre. Just now she's Irish. Ha, ha, ha!"

Bud gasped. What did he mean? Norah Clarey was the only Irish girl in that country. Or was it only a wild boast of the egotistical half-breed?

"I'm go long ways north," explained Joe. "Go too far for police to follow. And Joe Burgoyne take his girl along. The police give me two more days, and I be long ways from here."

"You get married, Joe?" asked one of the cowboys.

"You bet! Without priest. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Came the sound of the trap-door being violently thrown back, a sharp exchange of words and two muddy, half-exhausted men fairly tumbled down the stairs. Swiftly they looked around. Joe was coming toward them.

"Conley got away, Joe!" panted one of them. "He set fire to the cabin and got away. He killed one of the Injuns and damn near killed the other!"

"Diable!" swore Joe. "You say that Conley got away and—"

"Yes, yes! Not only that, but I think he stole the team and wagon. Me and Beaupre got there just after he escaped. We left the team about a hundred yards from the burnin' cabin, and when we came back it was gone."

"The team and wagon gone?" Joe screamed, shaking the man by the shoulders. "*Mon dieu!*" He struck the man full in the face and sent him reeling against the wall.

The room was in an uproar. Came a sound of someone hammering on the wall, almost directly behind Bud. One of the men shoved Bud aside and flung the door open.

A man fairly fell into the room; a man who was hatless, coatless, and whose face was streaked with blood. One of the men

grabbed him and held him against the bar. It was the man Bud had knocked down at the entrance to the tunnel.

"Hell!" exploded a voice wonderingly. It was the other man who had carried a keg.

"What does this mean?" he yelled. "Campeau comes with me to carry the whisky, and now—what does it mean?"

He was peering into Campeau's face.

"Somebody hit me," whined Campeau. "I wake up outside. I never bring de keg."

"You no bring in the keg?"

"No, I tell you. Somebody hit me—"

"Where is that other man?" roared one of the crowd, "who bring in the other keg?"

Bud knew that the crisis was at hand and prayed that he might shoot straight. Cautiously he moved over beside the card-table and almost directly under the light.

He had drawn his gun, but kept it concealed. Now he turned and looked deliberately at Joe, who was scanning the crowd. Joe's eyes blinked wonderingly, as he saw Bud's face, and a gasp of surprise burst from his lips.

But before he could cry a warning his voice was drowned in the deafening crash of the heavy revolver, which Bud had almost thrust against the big lamp.

Bud staggered back, swung up the gun and fired deliberately at the other lamp, with a prayer on his lips that it might be a dead-center shot. At the crash of the cartridge the room was plunged in darkness.

Bud had taken the only chance left—to escape in the dark. In a moment the room was a maelstrom of cursing, fighting men, who fought blindly, losing all sense of direction in their mad rush to lay hands on Bud Conley or to find an exit out of the place.

Tables were overturned, chairs smashed; but Bud was not in that whirl of frightened humanity. As he fired at the lamp he sprang sideways to avoid the rush of humanity and dove straight for the bar. Men crashed into him as he clawed his way to the top, but he held his place and smashed away merrily with his gun whenever anyone tried to share the bar-top with him.

Some of the crowd had fought their way to the stairway and were going out through the trap-door, while others were crowding into the tunnel exit.

"Don't let him get away!" screamed Joe's voice, "He's police spy!"

Bud grinned. Joe knew that Bud was no longer with the service, but he wanted to frighten the crowd into killing Bud, if possible.

CHAPTER VI

A FIGHT IN THE FLAMES

BUD knew there was no use of trying to get away just now. He could see that the upstairs was lighted, and he knew that those already outside the tunnel would see that he did not escape in that direction.

He could hear men shouting upstairs, as they questioned each other. A cold draught was blowing in the tunnel exit, but Bud did not move. Something seemed to tell him to keep still and wait. There seemed to be no one except himself left in the tunnel.

Then, out near the center of the room, a match flared up. Whoever lit the match was lying on the floor. As it grew brighter,



Bud could see the saturnine features of Joe Burgoyne. He raised himself up and looked around. The room was a wreck. Just beyond him lay a man, flat on his face, and another was propped against the wall, his head flopped forward.

As Joe turned to look at this man the flame of the match scorched his fingers and he flung it aside.

A sheet of flame seemed to fairly lift from the floor around Joe and he sprang to his feet with a yelp of alarm.

He had dropped the match into the pool of oil from the smashed lamp. Joe backed away from it; backed almost into the bar before he turned and saw Bud. But Bud had risen to his haunches and launched himself straight into the surprised half-breed.

Joe was as lithe as a tiger, and, although Bud's attack carried him almost into the flames, he twisted loose and bounded toward the stairway. A cloud of kerosene-laden smoke billowed up through the trap. Someone yelled a warning and before Joe could reach the top of the stairs the trap crashed down.

Bud had lost his gun and now he darted back to the bar, searching for it. Joe must have divined Bud's misfortune, for, with a yelp of joy, he darted back from the stairs, knife in hand. It seemed as if the

whole end of the room was in flames now and the black smoke was stifling.

Bud braced himself for the shock, but the half-breed did not come to close quarters. He stopped just out of reach, half crouched, the knife held point outward, as though he was using a rapier. The light glistened on the polished blade, but Bud did not retreat.

Joe's face was scarred and bleeding from the fight in the dark, which had but increased the injuries inflicted by Bud in Beaudet's store. Joe balanced on the balls of his feet and worked in closer and closer.

Bud was standing almost over his revolver, but did not dare to stoop for it. Behind Joe the flames roared upward, licking at the beamed ceiling, and the heat was growing intense.

"You finish queek now!" said Joe.

Bud began working slowly toward the bar, dragging the gun with his foot. Joe advanced inches at a time. He did not understand what Bud was trying to do. Then his eyes flashed to the bar—and he knew.

The keg, with its scarlet coat, had fallen to the floor, but the wide hat was still there, partly concealing the bottle, on which it had rested.

Quick as a flash Joe darted forward, but Bud, instead of reaching for the bottle, as Joe expected him to, dropped flat on the floor under Joe's feet, rolling forward as he fell.

The move was so unexpected that Joe took a header into the bar, while Bud rolled away and sprang to his feet clutching the revolver in one hand.

The fall did not hurt Joe. He had lost his knife, but not his presence of mind. He scrambled to his feet and darted straight for the tunnel exit, but Bud blocked him with a swing of the heavy revolver and Joe went down in a heap.

The room was an inferno now. Bud grasped the limp half-breed, swung him up in his arms and staggered into the tunnel. There was less smoke in there, owing to a breeze outside, which drove the smoke up through the cracks on the room above.

Bud was traveling blindly, holding Joe in front of him and hoping against hope that there would be no one guarding the tunnel entrance. But his hopes were not realized.

He caught a glimpse of the lantern and could see that it was held in the hands of a man. There were other men out there, too. Bud halted.

"Nobody left in there," argued a voice,

which he knew belonged to Bull Cook. "Whatsa use of stayin' here?"

"I'm be not so sure," replied another. "Conley not get out ahead of us, and, ba gosh, he never get up de stairs. W'ere is Joe Burgoyne?"

"Must 'a' gone up the other way. What's all the yellin' about?"

Bud knew that the yelling must be from those at the burning hotel.

"We stay here," declared the man. "Dis be one damn bad night for Kingsburg, eh?"

"Yeah, I reckon we gotta drift, Frenchy. I hope that Joe nails that dirty spy."

Bud knew that there was no time to lose, if he was going to get away. There were two men guarding the tunnel, but two men would be easier to handle than that whole mob, which might appear at any time.

He gripped Joe tightly in his arms, half burying his face in Joe's back, and stumbled straight into the lantern light.

"De place be on fire," he stated, imitating the language and tone of a French-Canadian.

"I'm save de boss, ba gar!"

"*Mon dieu!*" exclaimed one of them. "W'at happen to Joe? You say——"

The man had placed his hands on Joe, when Bud let loose with his right hand, and, with a short swing of the heavy gun, struck the man across the head. He grunted softly and went to his knees, and Bud flung the limp body of Joe across him.

The other man sprang aside and threw up his rifle, but he was cramped in the narrow space and the rifle spouted fire across Bud's breast. The concussion staggered him, but he dove into the man, trying to hit him with his revolver.

The rifle clanged to the floor and the husky cowboy flung Bud aside against the rocks, but instead of following up his advantage he ducked low and ran into the tunnel.

Bud staggered away from the rocks, his breath almost knocked from his body. His lungs ached and a stream of blood was running into his mouth, but he managed to pick Joe up in his arms and stagger away from the tunnel.

The glow from the burning hotel seemed to light up the whole country. Men were yelling and running about, but Bud only staggered on, half-falling, laughing foolishly, swearing at himself, as he headed for the wagon and team, which must be somewhere out that way.

Several times he went down, falling over Joe, but he got back to his feet, picked up his unconscious captive and staggered on. He was hanging onto his gun all this time, and swearing at Joe for being a burden on him.

CHAPTER VII

THE RUNAWAY GAUNTLET

HE FOUND the wagon and dumped Joe into the box. The broncho team was chilled from the rain and needed no urging. Bud braced himself on the swaying seat, but made little attempt to guide the horses.

The rain had ceased now and a rift in the clouds gave him some idea of the road. Through sort of a haze he could see the glow of the burning building, and it seemed to be straight ahead.

Suddenly he jerked upright in the seat. The road must run straight through Kingsburg, he reasoned. He would have to drive through that street.

"Only one road to Eagle's Nest," he told himself aloud. "Gotta take that road.

Hurrah for Ireland!"



He dropped off the seat, hurled it off the wagon-box, and knelt in the bottom. Then he lashed the horses with the ends of the lines and they broke into

a wild run.

"Erin go bragh, and everythin' else!" he yelled, as they went careening wildly down the rutty, muddy road, straight into Kingsburg.

The hotel building was a mass of flames, Burning embers were exploding in the air like sky-rockets, and the panic stricken horses were running as though a thousand devils were after them.

The crowd saw them coming and tried to stop them, but as well try to stop the wind. The team whirled aside, swept the porch-post from under the wooden awning, yawed wildly, but swept back into the road, while from behind them came to yelling voices of men.

"Yee-ow!" yelled Bud. "Pow-w-uder River!"

For a mile or more they raced wildly, while Bud clutched the wagon-box to keep from being thrown out. The clouds had broken now and the road was visible. He

tried to control the team, which was almost exhausted, but they were not through running yet.

A little further on they ran into a stretch of deep mud, which pulled them down to a walk. It was growing daylight now. Bud nodded with drowsiness. He was weak from exertion and loss of blood and had no mind to fight it off; he wrapped the lines around his arm and braced himself against the side of the wagon-box.

THEN it seemed that the team had stopped and he heard voices. Someone was shaking him. He opened his eyes and looked up at Grandon.

"Good ol' Grandon," muttered Bud. "Yuh ain't changed a bit. How are yuh?"

Grandon had a smile on his face and Bud shook his head. This could not be Grandon. He must be dreaming. Then he saw old Louie Beaudet, looking down at him; then Dr. Clarey.

"I've sure got lots of folks in m' dreams," he grinned sleepily, but no sound came from his lips.

They were talking now and he frowned over the line of conversation. It was not just like a dream, somehow. He turned his head and glanced around. The familiar interior of Louie Beaudet's store was too real to be a dream, and if that was not enough, there was Norah Clarey sitting in a chair, looking at him.

It was a very disheveled Norah Clarey, to be sure, and her face was white and tired-looking. Little Marie Beaudet was crouched on the floor beside her, holding her hand.

Bud frowned. It was beyond him. The doctor and Grandon were talking about Joe Burgoyne. Then it began to come back to him; the fight, the runaway team. He turned back on his pillow and stared up into Henderson's face.

"Where's Joe Burgoyne?" asked Bud weakly.

At the sound of his voice, Grandon and the doctor came to his side and looked down at him.

"Burgoyne is in jail, Bud," said Henderson, "and he'll stay there for a good long time."

Bud wrinkled his brow, as he tried to figure out how they knew about Joe's crimes. The doctor had put his hand on Bud's shoulder and was speaking down to him.

"Bud Conley, I don't know how I can ever thank ye."

"Yo're plumb welcome," said Bud in a puzzled voice, and then to himself. "Sure, there's some mistake here, cowboy."

"Ba gar, I'm tak' back w'at I say about you, Con-lee," said Louie Beaudet hoarsely. "I'm hope you forgive."

"Sure," nodded Bud, more at sea than ever. He twisted his head and looked at Norah. She was smiling at him and he grinned foolishly. He knew that he was going to wake up pretty soon and find himself out in the rain. This was too good to last. He moistened his lips with his tongue and grinned up at Grandon.

"Say, I found where all them men went, Grandon. There was a big cellar under



Magee's place, with a tunnel from the outside. I found their liquor cache, too. Joe was the leader of the whole gang. He was the one that shot Mc-

Kay and the Indian, I think."

"I know that is true," nodded Grandon. "Burgoyne was the boss of Kingsburg, but he spent his time here watching our movements. No wonder we could never find out anything."

"It burned down," said Bud slowly, "and we had a reg'lar he-man fight."

"From the looks of Burgoyne, I'd agree with that," said Henderson.

"But how in hell—?"

Bud stopped and apologized for his profanity, but before he could continue, Grandon said, "Joe boasted of how he ruined you with the force, Conley. Magee poisoned your drink, and they stole little Marie and forced her to drink the same liquor. Joe wanted the doctor to find you and Marie together. You see, Joe wanted you away from Miss Clarey."

"Oh!" exploded Bud, "but how—?"

"The red coat she saw was the one they stole from McKay," interrupted Grandon. "They thought she might see it. Joe wanted an excuse to break off his engagement with Marie; so he tried to kill two birds with one stone. Joe robbed Louie and left your gun beside the safe."

"Thasso?" blinked Bud. This was all news to him. "Did Burgoyne tell yuh all this?"

"No, he told nothing," declared the doctor. "But, like all of his kind, he was a boaster, and he told it all to Norah."

"Oh—yeah," breathed Bud. "Uh—well, I don't—" He turned his head and

squinted at Norah, as though trying to find what it was all about.

"It was a wild night for us, too," laughed the doctor, but without mirth. "Norah disappeared right after dark and we spent most of the night, hunting for her in the rain, and were on our way to Kingsburg, when you nearly ran us all down.

"Norah doesn't know much of what happened, because they had her under all that canvas in the rear end of the wagon-box, but she recognized your voice. Burgoyne was going to take her away with him. The man must be mad."

Bud gulped several times and shut his eyes. Norah had been in that wagon all the time! No wonder Joe Burgoyne had screamed over his loss and knocked the man down.

And he, Bud Conley, had run the gauntlet of that town; yelled like a wild fool and let that team run away, regardless, while Norah was under the canvas in the rear of that wagon-box. He shuddered and opened his eyes.

"You will not leave Eagle's Nest now, will ye?" queried the doctor.

Bud turned his head and looked at Norah. She was smiling at him. He looked up at Grandon.

"Sure, I dunno." He lapsed into his brogue for a moment, "I don't know why I should stay. There's nothin' for me to do here. I'm no longer a policeman."

"Still want to leave the force, Conley?"

"Still—say, what the devil's the matter, Grandon? Am I looney, or did I dream that I resigned?"

Grandon chuckled softly. "You did resign, Conley." It was not like Grandon to chuckle.

"Perhaps we were both a little hasty, Conley. Did you ever resign before?"

"I've always been fired," said Bud ruefully.

"And I've never received a resignation, which may account for it," said Grandon. "At any rate we overlooked one of the most essential things, Conley."

"And what was that?"

"Your signature."

"Well—I'll—be—danged!" Bud wrinkled his nose. "I betcha I overlooked it."

Norah got up from her chair and came over to him.

"Are you going to sign it, Bud?" she asked anxiously.

"Who me? Sign—say, what do you—" He looked up at Norah and the smile was wiped off his lips now. "I've lost a lot of blood, but I still retain my full quota of sense. I'll not sign, and I'll try to make good."

"Conley," said Grandon softly, "You have made good."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Bud, but he was not looking at Grandon. "I wasn't meanin' the force, sir."

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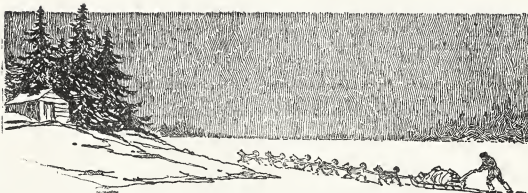
EAST!

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES



A STORY of the West in the East; of a young American bent on adventure who came up against one of the age-old mysteries of China—land of enigmas—and found the high adventure he sought.



MAKE GOLD WHILE THE WATER RUNS

By ROBERT RUSSELL STRANG

Author of "Saving Wood and Saying Nothing," "The Witness from Circle City," etc.

LUCK CHANGES IN THE NORTH COUNTRY AS IT DOES THE WORLD OVER—
BUT ALASKA IS A HARD COUNTRY TO GET OUT OF, IF YOU'RE WANTED

THERE'S no use talkin' fellas, I'm the luckiest guy that ever was born!"

The speaker began to sing:

*"I held a flush in Klondyke,
A full house down in Nome;
I rolled 'em sevens on Tanana
On the creek we called it Dome.
I'd four of a kind in Koyukuk,
Three kings in the Kuskoquim,
And I'm known from Skagway to Chandelar
As your uncle Lucky Jim.*

"No brains at all, y' understand, boys, nor need for 'em. If I depended on the gray stuff under my hat for my three daily squares, I'd have to worry along with a stomach no bigger than a walnut. But me and luck are the best of tillicums. He has helped me get away with a stake in every placer camp in Alaska. Fact!"

"Did you get very far with any of 'em?" sneered Chenoa Pete, a man with pig's eyes and a hanging lower lip.

The crowd laughed at this sally, but no one louder than Lucky Jim himself.

"I did not," he replied with a wry face. "I never tried to. But one of these days I'll be makin' a little trip to Frisco."

"Why don't you go out and make a strike in this district?" Mike Haggart

wanted to know. "We surely need one."

"I never try to make a strike within a hundred miles of a gin mill. Hootch and work don't mix."

This statement riled Pinleg Scoddy, the proprietor of the Red Fox. An ugly, domineering, soulless brute he was.

"The sooner yuh goes out and makes a stake the better I'll like yuh," he growled. "Yuh owes me ten ounces now."

The tin clock back of the bar had it all to itself for a full ten seconds, which it made the most of.

"Ain't it awful, fellas?" Lucky Jim

asked the group of parka clad men who stood about the big stove. "Ain't it hell? The man behind the bar says I owe him ten ounces!"



Nonchalantly he rolled a cigarette, lighted it and took a deep pull, then turned and faced Pinleg Scoddy.

"I owe you ten ounces, you say." He blew a cloud of smoke from his mouth. "I don't doubt you. I take a man's word every time. 'Cause if you can't take that, he ain't got nothin' else wuth a hoot." He took another leisurely pull at his smoke.

"I owe you ten ounces, and since last fall I've shoved over three hundred ounces across your spruce planks. Ain't that right?"

"It don't matter a damn what you've spent!" Pinleg shot back. "You'll decorate the bar next time yuh invites the bunch to drink."

"I'm invitin' them right now!" Lucky Jim cried in a voice that caused Pinleg Scoddy to start. "Have a drink with me, boys!" he shouted. To Pinleg he added, "I'll be in town but two days more, but I mean to have my drink when I want it and where I spent my money. Set 'em up!"

Out of the corner of his eye the proprietor of the Red Fox got a glimpse of the hard looks that were being directed at him.

"This will be the last one," he growled sullenly as he set out the glasses.

By ones and twos—and an embarrassed lot they were—the men strolled up to the bar. Dad Manslow was the only one that made no move. Lucky Jim did not notice this until after the glasses were filled.

"What's the matter, Dad?" he inquired.

"I'll tell yuh what!" wrathfully shouted the old man. "After such an uncalled-for bawl-out I'll never again lift another glass of hootch off'n Pinleg Scoddy's bar! He's the cheapest skate that ever struck Totatla City—which has always been my opinion of him."

In high dudgeon the speaker got on his crutches and began to thump toward the door.

"Just a minute, Dad!" called Lucky Jim. "You've taught me a lesson."

Lucky Jim lifted his glass and tossed its contents on the floor.

"What's good enough for you, Dad," he observed, "is pie for me. Add this to the ten ounces," he flung at Pinleg, then turned and joined Dad Manslow at the door.

With two exceptions—Chenoa Pete and Mike Haggart—the others left their drinks untouched and returned to their seats.

Lucky Jim opened the door for his companion and followed him to the street.

"I wants yuh to come around to my shack, Lucky. I've a proposition to make yuh."

"Right," returned Lucky Jim.

They started up the water-front.

The young moon crested with silver the snow-billows of the seemingly interminable flat across the frozen river. The air was absolutely soundless, and cold enough

to bite like fire. Totatla City, a one-sided street of log cabins and stores half-buried in snow, seemed deserted.

They had traveled scarce a hundred yards when Chenoa Pete slipped out of the Red Fox and peered cautiously up the street. He kept his eye on them until they entered Dad Manslow's cabin, then hastened in that direction.

Chenoa Pete was a man who didn't believe in hard work. He did a little gambling, some polite stealing, and a bit of rough stuff when the opportunity presented itself. A man who lived by his wits. Mike Haggart was his side-kick.

He approached Dad Manslow's cabin with the caution of a cat on the hunt. When he arrived at the door he turned back the hood of his parka and began to listen with all his might.

"—I've drank yore hootch ever since yuh struck the camp," Dad was saying, "and enjoyed yore comp'ny mightily. The spirit, as ye might say, of Alaska is strong in yuh. Yo're the man I've bin a-lookin' fur fur a year. Are yuh open fur a proposition this summer that'll net yuh anywhere from three to five thousand dollars?"

"Hold on, Dad," cautioned Lucky Jim. "Since I struck Totatla City I've heard whisperin's about you hitting the camp a year ago last fall with a couple of thousand in dust, and believe me, there's a few who would give something to know where you got it. I don't. A secret ain't a secret when two know it, and you really don't know me from one of the ravens down on the bluff. Besides, I'm so lucky myself that—so to speak—I've always got a little pot of gold in the hole."

"Lucky Jim, I've lost my strength, I admit, but, by gum! I've still got my judgment. I'll put it to yuh another way. Yo're a pioneer yoreself, will yuh do a pioneer a favor?"

Lucky Jim reached a hand across the table. Dad pressed it in silence.

"A year ago last fall I arrived in the camp with \$2000 and the scurvy. I had been in the hills for over a year, and had lived on meat and fish straight for half that time. After I've eaten a peck of raw potatoes and put the scurvy on the run, my next choice is rheumatism. It was winter, so couldn't go nowhere.

"Now and again I used to make a trip over to the Red Fox and spend the evenin'. One night along toward spring they knock me out over there and take \$1200 of my dust. Anyway, when I wake up in my

cabin next morning, I've got but \$400 left. I've been living on that for a year now.



"I've always blamed Pinleg Scoddy, Chenoa Pete and Mike Haggart for that trick. Next day they told me I got awful drunk and just threw my gold around like sawdust.

Seein' I never did that all my life before, I'm pretty certain I didn't do it that night. Since then I've suspicioned every man that hangs around there but you.

"In the condition I'm now in, one night in the open would be the death o' me. I don't want charity, but I do want to get hold of enough dust to take me to the hot springs at Sitka and get the aches and pains boiled outa my old carcass. I figger a thousand dollars would put me on my feet again as fit as a fiddle—why, man, I'm only seventy-seven! After that I'm goin' back to the Caribou diggin's. I had good ground there in the seventies. And there's a gulch there— But never mind that. Get me a thousand dollars, Lucky Jim, and you can keep every other color you take out of Easy Money bar this summer, and keep the bar to boot."

"You'll go to Sitka next fall, Dad!"

The old man's Adam's apple worked up and down for a few moments.

"This yere Easy Money bar," he resumed, "is about two hundred miles up the river, but easily located once yuh have the key to its position. I cached my rocker under some moss on the mainland, and I reckon the high water last spring wiped out all traces of me, but yuh can't miss it. I'll tell yuh why."

Dad lowered his voice to a whisper and imparted to Lucky Jim the information necessary to a recognition of Easy Money bar.

While this was taking place Chenoa Pete cursed softly and fluently. He did not catch a word of the directions. He tiptoed away, still cursing.

For some moments after Dad concluded Lucky Jim made no comment, just sat there smiling to himself.

"Have I made it plain enough to yuh?" Dad inquired.

Lucky Jim started.

"As plain as day!" he rejoined. "Bein' the luckiest guy that ever was born, I could go up the river blindfold and find it. I'll hit the trail day after tomorrow sometime.

How are you fixed for grub till I get back?"

"I'll manage! I'll manage!" Dad hastily exclaimed.

Lucky Jim threw a hurried glance around the cabin. The only thing his eye encountered in the line of food was half a sack of flour.

"I'll tell you why I asked," he said. "I've got three hundred pounds of good grub down in my shack that the dogs can't possibly haul, and if I leave it behind you know what the squirrels will do to it. Wish you'd let me haul it over here."

"I—I ain't got much room," Dad lied. "Yuh see—"

"I'll haul it over anyway. Then you can use what you want of it and pay me for it in the fall. How is that?"

"Well," Dad laughed, "since yuh put it thataway. And I'll sure settle for it in the fall."

"Much obliged," said Lucky Jim. "I'll be over with that junk tomorrow night."

He lifted the latch and departed.

"Wonders will never cease!" declared Lucky Jim as he returned over town. "To think that his Easy Money should be my Gold Tender, the bar I staked last July!"

He strode into the Arctic Trading Company's store. From beneath his parka he withdrew a gold watch to which was attached a heavy nugget chain. He detached the timekeeper and threw the chain in the gold scales.

"See how much you make that," he asked Ned Griffin.

The latter balanced the chain with weights.

"Fourteen ounces two pennyweights," he made answer.

Jim spent nearly all of it on provisions, all of which he took to his own shack first to allay any suspicions Dad might have had.

Then he loaded up the things and took them to Dad's cabin, remarking he was glad to have somewhere to leave the grub, as he couldn't possibly pack it with him.

Dad eyed the outfit, then tried to catch Lucky Jim's eye, but failed.

"Yuh must have put in a hell of an outfit last fall," he at length remarked suspiciously.

"It's the first thing I attend to when I hit a camp with a poke. Get me a cabin and fill it with grub."

The provisions were stowed away in silence.

"I'll be hittin' the trail between now and morning," whispered Lucky Jim, "that is,

if she snows. What was it you named that bar again?"

"Easy Money."

Lucky Jim slapped his knees and laughed uproariously.

Dad stared at him in amazement.

"Anythin' the matter with it?" he inquired.

"Nothing; nothing at all. But did you ever get a ny easy money out of the ground, Dad?"

Dad smiled. "Every color I've ever panned or rocked I've always considered easy money."

"Though you had to work your head off to get it."

Dad nodded. "But it's the only life," he declared.

"There's no doubt about it!" seconded Lucky Jim. "Well, look for me the third week of September. That will give you time to get down to Fort Gibbon and catch a boat for the Outside. So long."

"And good luck," wished Dad.

"I never travel without her," Lucky Jim called over his shoulder,

II

IT DID snow that night, and Lucky Jim steered his sled across the frozen river about two o'clock. On arriving at the farther bank he slipped on his snowshoes and took the lead. The dog-team followed.

This dive into the wilderness seemed to differ little from starting across the ocean in a small boat, for the great flat resembled a sea that had been frozen when a heavy swell was on. But although Lucky Jim had never crossed the flat before—it was a route that invited hardship, even disaster—he knew perfectly well what he was doing. He was cutting off a great elbow in the river.

About four that afternoon he made camp on an "island," a half-acre covered with scrub spruce and birch. Centuries before this piece of high ground had doubtless occupied a place in the river channel of that time.

In the afternoon of the fourth day out he struck the river again. The weather had cleared. He reckoned he had covered sixty miles since leaving Totatla City—a distance he could have negotiated much

sooner had he been traveling light and pressed for time; but the dogs were hauling a load in excess of seven hundred pounds, three hundred of which was their own rice and dried salmon.

And in reality Lucky Jim had made good time, for by crossing the flat instead of coming around by the river he had cut the distance from Totatla City in two. This he proved to his satisfaction by reason of a peculiarly shaped hill on the opposite bank, at the foot of which he had camped over night on his way down the fall before, and from which point it had taken him twenty-four hours by raft to reach Totatla City. He reckoned the river current—in the fall of the year—at five miles an hour.

He started up the river on the shore ice next morning. An hour later he arrived at the foot of the rapids, and shortly thereafter passed up through the canyon.

Fifteen days out from Totatla City he made his camp on Easy Money bar—or, as he had named it the summer before, Gold Tender. That night he made himself a calendar for the month of April out of the leaf of a notebook and crossed out the first day.

"On the face of it," he chuckled that night after rolling into his wolf robe, "it sounds queer that I should have landed on Dad's bar last summer, but not after you come to think it over. The bar is one of the highest on the whole river, I guess, and the heavy wash gravel that carries the pay stares everybody that passes in the face. Only a chechako would miss it, or one of the hot-air prospectors that hang around the Red Fox and the Nugget hotels. Which I take it Dad and me are the only two old-timers who have passed this way."

Lucky Jim had come over the divide from the Kantishna region the summer before.

A week later Lucky Jim was in possession of a good summer cabin—he had occupied a tent on his previous stay on the bar—and was engaged chopping down some spruce trees destined to become sluicing lumber, when the barking of the dogs announced the approach of someone. He paused and listened. A jangle of sleigh-bells came to his ear. Shouldering his axe



he stepped to the bank and looked down the river. At a distance of three hundred

yards he spied two mushers each driving a dog-team attached to which were heavily laden sleds. He went into his cabin, belted on a gun and returned to the bank to await the strangers' arrival.

As they drew near he noticed that both men were deeply tanned from the reflection of the April sun on the snow, and that they wore snowglasses. Because of these he did not at first recognize them.

"Hello!" he cried.

This hail was responded to in kind, but only after a slight but noticeable hesitation. He never removed his eye from them. They halted when they came level with him. He recognized them then as Chenoa Pete and Mike Taggart, men for whom he had little use. He had reckoned that they "didn't belong."

"Whither bound?" he asked.

"Oh, up the river a ways," returned Chenoa Pete.

"Unhitch and stick around for a day," invited Lucky Jim.

"We dassn't," spoke up Mike Taggart. "The snow is packin' fast and we've got quite a ways to go yet. Is this where you pick up your whisky dust?"

Mike waved a hand embracingly.

From where they stood, a dozen bars in the river were distinctly outlined, but in view of the fact that Lucky Jim had not yet done any work on Easy Money, all bars looked alike to the mushers.

Lucky Jim waved his hand in the manner Mike Taggart had employed.

"This is where I mean to do a little prospecting this summer," he made answer.

"Let's mush," suggested Chenoa Pete. "So long," he flung up to Lucky Jim, a civility repeated by Mike Taggart a moment later, and to which Lucky Jim replied in kind.

"We can't do a damned thing," swore Chenoa Pete when safely out of Lucky Jim's hearing, "until after he has gone to work. It may be any one of half a dozen bars near where he's camped. Let him do the dead work anyway, I mean to have a good long rest, beginning some time to-morrow."

"I'd give something to know how he got here so quick! He's put up that shack since he arrived. He took some short cut or another."

"He came fast, I'll admit, Mike, but no man in his senses would cut across the flat—summer or winter. He's probably got a crackjack team. He's some fast mover, though."

Lucky Jim returned thoughtfully to his

work. The meeting, from his point of view, had been an unsatisfactory one. The majority of mushers, he reasoned, would have stuck around and smoked a pipe or two, had dinner with him.

"They've left a bad taste in my mind," he declared.

BY MAY first Lucky Jim finished whipsawing lumber. He then turned his attention to a bedrock drain across the bar. The snow was about gone, but the earth was still frozen. He laid a wood fire four feet wide and about one hundred and fifty feet long diagonally across the bar, and lighted it. Next day he began to dig out the drain.

Lucky Jim did not work like an ordinary man; he was as tireless as a machine. And he worked intelligently. During every day of the next three weeks he worked eighteen hours a day. Worked and slept.

At the end of that time his bedrock drain was completed. It was five feet deep and on bedrock from one end to the other. He had struck good, even rich pay. He spent two days making sluice-boxes, another making riffles for them out of three-inch poles, and still another fitting the whole into his trench.



The ice in the river moved downstream that night. Beginning next morning he worked thirty-six hours, steady, on a wing dam. The last of the ice passed down the river. He pulled the gate in the dam and let the water into the boxes, picked down some pay dirt from the sides. It worked like a charm. He was ready to sluice. He staggered to his cabin, curled up in his blankets and was sound asleep in no time.

Out of a hundred men Lucky Jim would have been the only one to go to all this trouble. The remaining ninety-nine would have contented themselves with rocking, and let it go at that. The high water might last no longer than a week. But in that week's sluicing Lucky Jim would shove more pay dirt through the boxes than three men could rock all summer long.

Shortly after midnight—though almost

as clear as day at this time—the dogs began to bark, but Lucky Jim did not hear them. A few moments later Chenoa Pete shoved the barrel of his rifle through the open window, then cautiously raised his head. In that moment Mike Haggart entered by way of the door and covered Lucky Jim. Chenoa Pete then climbed in by way of the window.

Like a jack-in-the-box Lucky Jim suddenly raised himself to a sitting posture, and mechanically reached for his rifle which hung on the wall just above his bunk.

"Quit that and put them up!" ordered Mike Haggart.

Lucky Jim rubbed his eyes and glanced from one to the other.

"What's the idea?" he asked, raising his hands above his head.

"You're goin' back down the river," stated Chenoa Pete. "If you go quietly, everything will be hunkydory. If you make a fuss about it—why, you won't go at all. Get up!"

While his hands happened to be up Lucky Jim seized the opportunity for a good yawn.

"You poor crooks," he then said, throwing his legs over the bunk onto the floor. "I suppose you wouldn't listen to a partnership proposition?"

An idea had entered Lucky Jim's head.

"I should say nix!" exclaimed Chenoa Pete with a laugh. "You've got everything set and ready for a whoppin' cleanup a week from now. I'll say you're a good miner. But down the river you've got to go."

"And you're gonna stay down, too, see!" And Mike Haggart poked Lucky Jim in the side with the business end of his rifle.

"Just why are you running me off this bar?"

"Why? Good Lord, ain't we been watching Dad Manslow for eighteen months and tryin' to get outa him where he got that \$2,000 worth of dust? Do you think a bar like this is picked up every day?"

"Why don't you go out and hunt up your own bars?"

"Aw, cut out the wranglin'!" exclaimed Chenoa Pete. "Put some grub in a box and get the hell outa here!"

Lucky Jim filled a sack with provisions and, followed by the claim-jumpers, went down the trail cut in the bank to the beach. There he was ordered aboard a raft tied to the root of a drift log, then told to call his dogs aboard. When this was done,

they untied the rope and shoved the raft out into the current.

"So long," called Lucky Jim. "I'll see you in Totatla City when you come down."

"You've got some wait!" cried Chenoa Pete.

Lucky Jim started. "So they mean to go out by way of Kantishna, huh?" he mused.

"I still think we'd ought to have tied him," quoth Mike Haggart.

"You're a good man with your hands, Mike, but you ain't got the brains of a flea. Just suppose he was to get into Totatla City in that condition? They'd have something on us, wouldn't they? Or suppose he got drowned in the rapids and goes floatin' down the river and winds up on a bar—which Alaskan rivers are always doin'. Wouldn't the whole marshal's force at Fairbanks be put to work on the case? He's got nothing on us at all. The worst he can do is to get an injunction to throw us off, and he'd have to go to Fairbanks to get that. By which time the season would be over. And sein' he has no witnesses to corroborate his statement, I don't believe he could even get an injunction. Lucky Jim knows all this. He'll swallow his medicine and take a chance on meeting up with us some other time. Which he'll never get the chance. About the middle of September we'll duck across to Ruby and catch a down-river boat for Nome. We've got possession. Let's get to work. What shift do you want to take?"

"Night shift for mine; it's cooler."

"All right. Go on to bed. We've got to take advantage of every hour of the high water."

Chenoa went up the river about two hundred yards and crossed the mainland to the bar by way of Lucky Jim's log bridge. Five minutes afterward the water was racing through the sluices, and Chenoa Pete shoveling and picking in the pay dirt from the sides of the bedrock drain.

After watching the raft disappear around a bend Mike Haggart climbed the trail to the bank, thence to the cabin.

"I thought I had put everybody off my trail," Lucky Jim was saying to himself, "who might happen to be interested in my movements. I got away clean enough, but the same snow storm that protected that, also gave me away—the untracked snow about my cabin. Of course, one of them must have followed Dad and me to his cabin the night he made me the proposition. Well, there they are, and here I

am. I guess Dad's trip to Sitka is all off."

Thoughts of this riled him.

"They're robbin' an old pioneer, that's what they're doin'! And I had it figured out that he'd spend the rest of his days in comfort. And, by gum, he will, too!"

When about two miles below the bar Lucky Jim steered the raft into a slough



and went ashore. He kindled a fire and made himself a small pail full of coffee. Hour after hour he sat there drinking the warm liquid, and now and again throwing a couple of small sticks on the fire.

Around seven in the morning he cooked and ate his breakfast, then went to sleep.

He woke about five in the afternoon; cooked himself another meal, chained up the dogs, then climbed the hill. An hour later, from a point of vantage on the mountain spur that rose just back of his cabin, he looked down upon Easy Money bar. Not without a thrill he noticed that his bedrock drain was no longer that, but a real cut.

"I'll bet there's some real money in those boxes at this minute!" he cried.

Critically he inspected the several channels of the river beyond Easy Money and other bars, then the flat beyond these. Evidently satisfied with the results of his reconnoitre, he returned to his camp. His first act thereafter was to make a measuring stick and drive it into the river bottom a few yards from the shore.

Next day Lucky Jim took the dogs, crossed the divide and spent the day fishing on a stream on the other side. On his return with a mess of trout the first thing he did was to look at his measuring stick. The river, it told him, had gone down three inches during the past twenty-four hours.

"Five more days," he yawned. "Ho hum."

The customary thing on placer claims in Alaska is to make a cleanup every week. There was a special reason why the boxes would be cleaned up on Easy Money bar at the end of that period: If the river continued to fall and no rain came, there would not be sufficient water to sluice with. One or two men can't raise a whole river.

In the afternoon of the sixth day after

his ejection, Lucky Jim trekked up the river by way of the mountain ridge. When well beyond Easy Money bar he dropped down to the river, then crossed it on a log. He walked down the beach until within a half-mile of Easy Money bar, then disappeared into the flat—just plumb dropped out of sight.

This was made possible by reason of the fact that for years innumerable the flat had annually been inundated for miles back from the river during the high water in the spring, and the receding waters had honeycombed the black muck to a depth of eighteen inches to two feet. On top of the "niggerheads," or pillars of muck thus formed, grew wild bunch grass. Through this maze Lucky Jim started to crawl downstream, secure in the fact that no one could see him.

He arrived at a point in line with Easy Money bar at nine o'clock, mud from his nose to the toes of his moccasins. In places he had been obliged to crawl through several inches of exceedingly dirty water. But he got there.

Between his place of concealment and Easy Money bar lay two other bars, one of which was covered with willows. For almost another day he lay and watched both men at work in the cut. And what a cut!

"They've put through the boxes just about double the dirt that I could have done alone!" he whispered to himself.

At length Chenoa Pete left the cut and strolled up to the cabin. Mike Haggart continued to work alone.

It was still almost as clear as at noon, and the hills were rosy in the westering sun when Lucky Jim dropped down the bank and made for the first bar. Such was the racket made by the rocks going over the riffles in the sluice-race that there was slight chance of his being heard.

Keeping to one side so that even should Mike Haggart turn around he would still be none the wiser regarding his presence, Lucky Jim dashed across the second channel and into the willows of bar number two. A clump of birch on the lower end of Easy Money bar protected him against discovery from the cabin.

Lucky Jim collected his wits for the final rush. Carefully he selected two rocks from the tail-race that exactly fitted his capable hands, stepped into channel number three and up the tail-race into the sluice-boxes.

Mike Haggart never knew what struck him. He fell back into the boxes and the

water raced over him. Five minutes afterward, tied hand and foot and with the collar of his own shirt in his mouth as a gag, Lucky Jim dumped him among the willows of bar number two.

He then hastened to the head of the sluice-string and almost but not quite, shut off the water. Here he also discovered Mike Haggart's rifle, which he removed to a handier location. He began to pull the nails driven in the sides of the boxes which held the riffles in place. That done he washed the bottoms of them carefully. The gold dust lay on them like sawdust.

"It's goin' to be a fine clean-up," he declared.

He turned on a little more water and began to work down the residue with a shovel. Later he laid that aside and pulled two wooden paddles from his hip pocket; reduced the water, produced a home-made whisk-broom.

By and by a nice pile of clean gold lay against one side of the head box.

"Ten or twelve thousand dollars anyway," he assured himself. "Dad Manslow goes to Sitka, I guess!"

He scooped the gold into a panning pan that lay handy, and with this under one arm and Mike Haggart's rifle under the other he crossed the log bridge to the mainland and started up the hillside. Lucky Jim was taking no chances of losing the clean-up.



He returned fifteen minutes later, strode into the cabin and poked Chenoa Pete in the ribs with his rifle.

"Get up!" he ordered.

Chenoa Pete sat up and stared at him. His jaw fell, and for a few moments Lucky Jim expected a flood of tears. Never in all his life before had he been a witness to such keen disappointment. As had been meted to him when similarly situated, he once more jabbed the crook in the ribs.

"Get up and get out!"

Chenoa Pete was a big man and in a purely physical encounter would doubtless

have disposed of Lucky Jim, not easily, but by force of his advantage in weight. And because of this superiority, in the past he had got by fairly easily, and elected himself to the position of dictator of the parasite element in Totatla City. Dignity off its perch is a sad sight. His eyes actually filled with tears.

"Get the hell out of my cabin!" cried Lucky Jim, disgusted at this exhibition. "I'd like to sentence you to work alongside of me with a shovel for six months. Out you go!" And he poked the big fellow in the back and actually shoved him through the door.

There Chenoa Pete was commanded to take an axe and get to work on a raft. While this order was being executed, Lucky Jim seated himself on a stump with the rifle across his knees. Now and again he rolled a cigarette. When the raft was completed, its maker was requested to carry his partner from the farther bar and place him on it. But in the line of provisions Lucky Jim did not make the mistake they had made. He had been allowed to take what, and as much as he wanted, so had taken as much as would last him for about three weeks. He gave them a four-quart kettle half-filled with dry rolled oats—and no salt.

"Now let me tell you something," he warned them when ready to depart, "don't stick around Totatla City. Because if you're there when I arrive I'll call a miners' meeting. You know what that will mean to such as you. Now get!"

They got.

Lucky Jim followed by way of the bank, and took no little abuse, and listened to about a thousand threats, from Chenoa Pete. He merely laughed.

Two hours later he returned with a pack on his back and his dogs at his heels. Then he retrieved the clean-up from the hillside, dried and weighed it. It totalled \$10,500.

"I'm surely the lucky guy!" he exclaimed. "This looks as if I'd get away with a homestake this summer!"

He sluiced and shoveled into the boxes for two more days. When the water got so low that it couldn't carry off the washed rocks, he cleaned up once more. Fifteen hundred dollars this time. He dug out and re-set his boxes.

For over a month thereafter Lucky Jim rocked the pay dirt. This change from a swift to a slow method of getting rich would have disgusted the majority of miners in his affluent situation, but the thought

of going down the river at this time never even crossed his mind.

Along toward the first of August a wet spell set in, and being all set to take advantage of the high water, he subtly put the latter to work for him. For almost two weeks it rained steadily, all of which time Lucky Jim shoveled sixteen and seventeen hours every day.

"Make gold while the water runs," he would tell himself when his arms ached. "There's a long winter coming."

When for the second time the water went down, Lucky Jim's gold sacks contained a matter of \$22,000.

Still he kept his head and set to rocking again, and continued this until the middle of September. By which time the water was low in the river, the birch and willows yellow, and a light snow lay on the ground.

His summer's work on Easy Money bar had netted him something better than \$25,000. The gold was in five sacks of \$5,000 each.

"I guess," he said, "Dad can go to California or Timbucto if he wants to. And welcome. A pioneer has every right to spend his last years in comfort."

On the morning of September 17th he started down the river. He was lean, brown and as hard as nails. Late that night he made camp just above the can-



von. He wasn't minded to risk the rapids in the dark. Anyway, he reckoned he had plenty of time. He had relaxed and was enjoying his trip.

In the morning he went through the rapids without incident. A mile below this the main channel passed through a narrow gap between two islands. When half-way through, and at the narrowest point, a rope settled about his shoulders and he was jerked violently off the raft.

After a short struggle he got his arms free and started to swim for the shore. A small raft passed him on which stood Mike Haggart.

"How d'ye like it, huh?" he snarled and hit Lucky Jim a blow on the head with his pole in passing.

FOR some time thereafter the world was dark. He came to lying on the beach, the rope still about his waist. He struggled to his feet and stared downstream. He was just in time to see Chenoa Pete spring aboard his raft from the deck of a smaller one. He steered it into the eddy until Mike Haggart came along and joined him. Five minutes later they disappeared round a bend.

"This looks bad," muttered Lucky Jim. "And of course they'll drift clear to Fort Gibbon and catch a boat there for the Outside. Poor Dad." He wound the rope about his waist.

He crossed the island and waded the channel between it and the flat. He started walking down the bank, because there seemed nothing else that he could do. Meantime, he was thinking, and thinking the hardest he knew how.

Thirty minutes later he paused beside the charred remains of a camp-fire. He looked about him. He had a remarkable memory for landmarks.

"This is where I camped four days out from Totatla City last March," he said to himself. "Let's see."

He turned and looked away across the interminable flat. In mind he went over it the entire distance.

"I don't doubt but what the ground is firm by this time," he muttered, "but—Well, there's about one chance in a thousand that I nose them out! It's at least a hundred and twenty-five miles away by way of the river, and sixty, maybe a little more, across the flat. And I've still got my gun. Poor Dad!"

Lucky Jim started on a lope across the flat. Without a pound of grub.

Meanwhile, Chenoa Pete was complimenting his partner.

"I'll say you can handle a rope, Mike!" he declared admiringly. Then he laughed. "Damn if I ever saw anything so funny in all my life. I never did! One moment he was on the raft, and the next—haw, haw, haw! He went through the air like a fish on the end of a line!"

"At first," returned Mike, highly elated with the success of his exploit, "I meant to drop it around his neck. Then says I to myself, I won't get but the one chance, so I made the loop bigger and dropped it around his body."

"It was pretty work. Of course, I'd have got him with the rifle if you had missed, but I'm leary about rivers. I remember one time a guy in the upper country shot his three partners comin' down the

Yukon in a small boat and buried them on an island. Next year along comes the old river and washes half that island away and turns the three guys loose on the current. The Mounted Police finally picked them up, and two years later there was a hangin' in Dawson. Believe me, Mike, Alaska is a hard country to get out of, if you're wanted!"

"It is," Mike Haggart agreed. "But we ain't goin' out. Nome will be good enough for us this winter."


"Anywhere along the lower river."

They then hefted Lucky Jim's pokes of dust, and guessed and guessed again at the value of their contents.

"He surely is some worker!" vowed Mike Haggart.

The day passed and evening came on apace. Chenoa Pete rolled himself in a blanket and lay down. Mike Haggart set himself to watch till midnight. The moon rose and the stars came out.

All through that long day, loping and walking by turns, no definite plan formed itself in Lucky Jim's mind with regard to the manner of successfully handling the crooks even should he succeed in intercepting them. True, he had their lariat about his waist, and his gun was still in its holster at his belt—he had dried and cleaned it the first time he rested. Even so, the idea of shooting them down in cold blood was repugnant to him, and besides, might not be wholly effective, for the raft would continue to drift. But walking or running, the problem never for a moment left his mind.



He rested for two full hours at sunset, but when the moon shot up he resumed his way. As when he crossed the flat in the spring, he was going it blind. In reality, however, his sense of direction was so highly developed that he might have been racing along a chalked line that ended opposite Totatla City. During the years he had spent in Alaska, Lucky Jim had taken longer chances, and many of them, to save a long detour. He was a man perfectly at home in the wilderness.

For the first time in his carefree life he worried over an issue, dreaded the ap-

proach of the crucial moment. Not for his own, be it understood, but for Dad Manslow's sake. He would have done just as much on his own behalf, but he never would have worried, racked his brain for a solution to the affair. He would have trusted to what he called his luck, and backed the same with his indefatigable spirit and energy.

At six in the morning he encountered a rather wide back slough, the quicksand on the edge of which gave him pause. A bank of blue smoke rimmed with sunlight away to the left he guessed must be Totatla City. He reasoned, therefore, that he could not be far from the river. He was nervous, but never for a moment did he forget the main chance. He must get to the river just as fast as he could. He started along the bank of the slough.

Lucky Jim no longer ran. Nor, despite his long fast and his almost continuous effort, could it be said that he staggered. It was a queer, humped-up lope. The joints of his knees were so stiff, and ached so that, in order to avoid bending them, when taking a step he flung his leg out from his body. On the stage or in a motion picture, his manner of locomotion would have been considered a scream.

The lariat was still about his waist, and the gun still hung at his belt.

He came upon the river suddenly on rounding a bend. To stave off reaction, the desire to fling himself down and forget everything, he walked into the river and headed for an island against which the current nibbled. At the deepest point, which was a mere dozen feet from the island, the water just reached his armpits. He breasted this on an upstream slant and finally effected a landing.

He turned and looked back. He at length decided that any raft, or tree or floating thing that came down the river must of necessity come within twenty feet of the island. And before he was aware of it, he had, so to speak, seized his problem by the throat.

He went to the lower end of the island and tied three drift logs together with the lariat; left it on the shingle ready to launch. He returned to the head of the island and gathered a pile of stones. A couple of shots over their heads from his gun and a swat on the head with a rock would, he reasoned, create no little confusion, out of which he expected to come with a drop on them.

Miracles will never cease is a true saying. They never cease to happen for the

benefit of those who help them with all their might to come to pass. Lucky Jim was still piling rocks when he happened to look upstream and spy the nose of the raft coming around a bend about a third of a mile away. He flattened himself in the brush and waited; drew his gun.

As the raft drew nearer he sighted the dogs, and started. The fools! Weren't there a hundred men in Totatla City who knew his dogs? What damned fools they were! But how his heart did sing within him. He repressed the desire to let loose a great big laugh. Towser, his lead dog lay in the front end, his massive head on his paws. He looked—or so thought Lucky Jim—peevish. Chenoa Pete had a hand on the sweep; his companion was lying down.

The raft came on without a ripple. The current was driving it toward the upper end of the island. Chenoa Pete began to work the sweep, leisurely. When thirty feet distant Lucky Jim fired a shot over his head then sprang to his feet.

"Sick 'em, Towser!" he shouted. "Sick 'em, Rum! Sick 'em, Rye! Sick 'em, Brandy!"

Coincident with calling each of his dogs by name Lucky Jim fired a shot. Then he sprang down to the beach, picked up a handful of gravel and threw it at the two men. Recognizing the familiar voice, the dogs first barked with delight. "Sick



'em,' they also understood without a doubt, for they immediately sprang on Chenoa Pete and Mike Haggart, snarling, snapping and biting, husky fashion.

The raft came alongside Lucky Jim, and just about ten feet away. He started down the beach in line with it.

"Jump, you fools," he shouted, "or they'll eat you alive!" He fired another couple of shots.

Out of the mêlée on the raft sprang a figure in rags bawling blue murder. There was a splash. Lucky Jim had just paused long enough to note that it was Chenoa Pete that was struggling in the water, and bawling still. He was followed a moment later by Mike Haggart. Neither man had had a chance to seize a gun. The dogs had kept them too busy.

Lucky Jim raced ahead a short distance then plunged into the water. The dogs welcomed him with yowls of joy as he climbed aboard the raft. His pokes of dust still lay in the bottom of his empty sled.

"Fine," he said.

He turned and looked back. Chenoa Pete was already ashore and Mike Haggart was climbing the bank. He waved his hand to them.

"You're the poorest fish that ever came out of this river!" he called to them.

HE DOCKED at Totatla City an hour later. The *Dusty Diamond* was at the wharf, bow downstream. Lucky Jim hitched the dogs to the sled and set out for Dad Manslow's cabin. The old man came to the door when he heard his voice.

"Well, Dad, here I am!" cried Lucky Jim. "And, believe me, my usual well-known luck has been on the job every minute since I left you. On the square, Dad! I'm the luckiest guy——"

Dad's grin, an ear-to-ear affair, cut him short.

"You tell that dodgasted rubbish about your luck to the sit-downers and stove-huggers!" he exclaimed. "I know what prospectors' luck is. It's guts an' gump-tion! Did yuh have any trouble findin' the bar or anything?"

Lucky Jim's whimsical smile faded.

"Why, Dad, twice a couple o' tin horns tried to put something over on me, but there wasn't enough gray matter mixed in with their stuff, which was pretty raw. It was easy money from Easy Money-bar, Dad." He uncovered the five pokes of dust. "And there's the clean-up," he concluded.

The Adam's apple on the old man's throat worked up and down, and his eyes blurred.

"God bless yuh, Lucky Jim," he mumbled.

Lucky Jim started to carry the gold inside. On a plate on the table were a few soda biscuits. He shoved one into his mouth, then went after another sack. Dad carried in the remainder while Lucky Jim stuffed himself with biscuits.

The *Dusty Diamond* let loose two blasts with her siren.

"Is she going down today?" inquired Lucky Jim.

"That's her fifteen minute whistle," replied Dad. "She'll be the last boat to

leave Totatla City this fall. I'd like to catch her. If you'll weigh me out that thousand dollars——"

Lucky Jim opened one of the sacks and did that. He poured the dust into the old man's poke.

"Now," said Dad, "I'll pay you for the grub. I guess I just about cleaned it up. How much was it?"

"Oh, call it two hundred dollars."

Dad weighed that amount out of his thousand and poured in back into Lucky Jim's poke.

Dad produced his dunnage bag. Into this Lucky Jim threw the four full sacks, \$20,000 worth.

"Hey!" cried Dad, alarmed. "What yuh doin'? That ain't mine!"

"Ain't I got as good a right to go outside as you have?"

The old man's face lighted up. "Gosh, that'll be great!" he cried.

Lucky Jim swung Dad's sack across his shoulders.

"Let's get aboard," he suggested. "I've still got a little debt to settle at the Red Fox."

He picked up the remaining sack of gold and led the way on board the steamboat.



Dusty Diamond's saloon.

"Don't ever let that bag out of your sight," he told Dad. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

a little raft drift past on which were seated two men back to back, sort of like twin billikins. He waved to them airily.

He dropped Dad's seventy-odd years' gatherings in the

Lucky Jim did not reappear on the dock until the gangplank had been hauled ashore and the lines cast off. Dad Manslow, almost frantic, stood on the saloon deck waving and shouting.

"Come on!" he cried, "Come on!"

Lucky Jim could still have jumped aboard.

"I can't come today, Dad," he made answer. "I'm too sleepy. Take care of yourself. So long."

The *Dusty Diamond* swung out into the channel.

Lucky Jim strolled across the street into the Red Fox and entered the bar. He was familiarly greeted by half a hundred men not unlike himself. He took off his old fur cap and bowed acknowledgments; tapped his breast.

"Lucky Jim," he cried, "from Easy Money bar."

He turned to stare at Pinleg Scoddy whose face was creased into something that remotely resembled a smile of welcome. He flung his poke on the bar.

"Take eleven ounces out of that!" ordered Lucky Jim coldly.

Pinleg Scoddy started at the size of the poke, and guessed at its value to within five ounces. He pushed it back toward its owner.

"Aw, forget that," he cried, "and have a little drink on the house."

"Take eleven ounces of dust out of that poke!" repeated Lucky Jim.

This time there was no temporizing. With a face as red as a split beet, Pinleg Scoddy weighed out what was coming to him and returned the poke to Lucky Jim.

The latter tucked the poke under his arm and turned to the crowd.

"Boys," he cried, "I'm going up to the Nugget hotel to raise the roof. I need all the help I can get. Come along!"

A minute later the Red Fox bar was empty.

A PINKERTON novelette in our next number

DOWNSTREAM

By Robert E. Pinkerton

A story of the North; of those pushing upstream, their fortunes still ahead; of those coming downstream, the magic of the wild behind them.



THE ROAD TO MONTEREY

A Yankee Sailor wages a lone-hand fight among the Cattle Dons of Southern California

By GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN

PART II

CHAPTER VI

IN THE PATH OF THE GOATS

HENDERSON felt his wits revolving for a moment like a straw in a whirlpool. The unlucky arrival of Don Roberto, the doubly unfortunate chance upon the lost shoe by his companion, had forced him into a situation that would require either great audacity or greater diplomacy to come out of with the lady's honor untouched in the eyes of those jealous and biased moralists.

He recalled her vividly in the light of the brief description she had given of herself, but with nothing of either the insignificance or the humility of the worm. She had not been present at the celebration before that day; her appearance among the belles of the *ranchos*, whose dark beauty was becoming rather tiresome, had been like a green hill to the mariner's eye.

He had puzzled over her that day, trying to account for the wide difference of type she presented, not knowing that Yankee marriages were common among the first families of California. Her hair was of a reddish brown, dusky in its depths where the Saxon strain mastered the Latin; her fair skin was dashed as she had said, with a little partridge-flight of freckles across her nose. Not of a prettiness such as would be appealing to these fast-maturing youths; rather a sober and studious type, her gray eyes wise and clear. There was a thinness in her cheek, as if whetted by a

sorrow, the reflection of trouble in her eyes. This he remembered, picturing her again, swiftly, as he stood trying to make fast a line to his swirling thoughts.

He must get hold of the shoe, he must create some sort of diversion that would lead the two strollers away from the tree, whatever their curious humor to pry into his supposed romance might be. The girl must be brought down out of the tree and taken to the house by some sequestered way, and all must be done in a matter of minutes, before her absence from the side of her *duenna* could connect her with the lost shoe.

The two young men had stopped beneath the tree, laughing over their discovery. Henderson feared the girl's fright might betray her, not knowing how improbable it was that a Mexican gentleman would look in a tree for a lady, though the rustling of her movement might be plain in his ears.

"What kind of a shoe is this—a sheep-skin sandal?" Don Roberto inquired, a laugh in his voice over the thought of this interrupted love-scene between his valet and some day-laborer's girl. "Come to the moonlight with this precious discovery, Don Fernando; let us see."

Don Fernando, the young man who had stumbled upon the shoe, hesitated, the small thing in his hand.

"It seems to be a lady's dancing-shoe. I believe such as might be meeting your servant under a tree by night would not wear a shoe of this kind, Don Roberto!

Somebody has lost it in a stroll, and could not find it again in the dark."

"Is it possible?" Don Roberto asked, something more than surprise in his voice, a thing ominous, suspicious. "Let us have a look at it over here."

"It is just a little thing of silk and kid," said Don Fernando, temporizing as if undecided what to do.

"Step into the moonlight, Don Fernando—it is half as bright as day. We'll see this pretty shoe, then watch for the mate of it. What a joke it will be to give back her shoe!"

"Oh, Don Roberto, Don Roberto!" his friend protested gently.

"But the shoe—give me the shoe, then, Don Fernando."

"If you will pry into a lady's misfortune," Don Fernando laughed, passing the shoe to his friend's outstretched hand.

"Permit me," said Henderson, snatching the shoe from Roberto's fingers.

"Impertinent dog!"

Roberto sprang back a step with the malediction thrown in his servant's face, as if to be out of reach of violence that he expected to follow it. The leap carried him into the moonlight, where he stood with hand at his sash, feeling for the weapon which, for the occasion, was not there.

"Restore me the shoe! This instant give it back!" he commanded.

"I was sent for it; I will restore it to the owner," Henderson replied, his manner lofty and severe.

"Who commands you?"

"That is for me to know, Don Roberto."

"Very well," said Roberto indifferently, as if the humor of the situation had mended the affront given him by his valet. "Go on, then, and take the shoe to its owner. We will accompany you, we will go by your side, to see the pretty foot that it fits."

"No, Don Roberto. Let the poor fellow have his hour of romance, if he can. I am not one with you to pry into it, or into the lady's confusion, let her be whom she may."

Fernando turned away with these words, going toward the house. Henderson felt his heart warm to the young fellow.

"Yankee thief! You'll feel the bite of rawhide for this," Roberto threatened. "Come, take me to the owner of this shoe."

Henderson stood in the bright moonlight confronting this petulant tyrant who believed himself master not only of the present situation, but the future as well. The little shoe was soft in Henderson's hand; he held its pliant thin sole bent in his palm, hiding it from Roberto's curiously hungry eyes. It was a moment for swift consideration, quick arrival upon a course that would save the shoe's owner from the blight of scandal. Don Fernando was walking away rapidly; he passed out



THE ROAD TO MONTEREY

GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN

The previous chapters

When Gabriel Henderson, young and keen for adventure, shipped aboard a Yankee ship, and sailed around the Horn to California, he little guessed how his future was to lie in that land of golden fortunes.

It was in the days of bucko skippers and Gabriel, driven beyond endurance by brutality and injustice, deserted ship while they were loading skins from the ranch of Don Abraham Cruz y Garzanza, not far from the pueblo of Los Angeles.

He escaped, but only from one servitude to another, for Don Abraham befriended him only to reduce him to peonage on his ranch. Don Abraham was a power in all that district of California, his cattle grazed on a thousand hills, and his name was feared for many square miles.

Young Henderson finds that, though suave in manner, the don has him in his power, and he accepts his bondage—but only until he can plan escape, which is a difficult matter, owing to the power of Don Abraham.

He is made the servant of Don Roberto, son of old Abraham, and his lot is every moment a trial to his proud spirit. At the feast celebrating the coming of age of Don Roberto, Henderson is questioned by Helena Sprague, affianced wife of Roberto, as to his presence as a servant. They are talking—which fact alone would compromise a woman in that country—when Roberto and a friend come along. Helena escapes up a tree, but her slipper falls into the hands of Roberto's friend.

of sight among the low-hanging branches of the pepper trees.

"Very well," Henderson yielded, after what seemed a struggle against himself.

"Half of your lashes will be remitted for this, my fine Gabriel," Roberto generously declared. "But for snatching the shoe out of my hand, may rats eat my heart if I do not find your ribs with my whip tomorrow!"

"This way, then," said Henderson, leading off in the direction of the laborers' huts below the brow of the hill.

Where there had been merely contempt for Roberto's pampered pride, his oppression and disdain, there leaped hot in Henderson's breast this moment a desire to bring him low. As quick as the flash of his vengeful desire, Henderson's lively mind contrived a way.

"Who is there in this direction wearing the shoes of a lady?" Roberto inquired, halting suspiciously after they had gone a few rods from the tree.

"It remains for you to see," Henderson replied. If Don Roberto had been schooled in the inflections of the human voice, he would have turned back that moment.

"Here now, Gabriel, give me the foolish shoe and let us be friends," Roberto coaxed, holding out his hand. "I promise you I will forgive you for taking it out of my hand, although you shamed me before a friend. Give it to me, and take my forgiveness."

Henderson looked behind him. They were only a little way from the tree where the girl trembled among the leaves, fearful of losing the good name that was more to her than life; not far from the long tables spread under the trees before the mansion, from which the laughter and clatter of those who fed around them came clearly.

"Why do you hesitate, little Gabriel?" Roberto asked impatiently. "The shoe, and be forgiven."

"Damn your generosity!" Henderson replied. The weight of his body was be-

hind the blow that he struck Roberto under the ear.

Roberto fell as limp as wet leather, for the iron of salt-horse and hard-tack, and months of disciplinary labor, was in that

blow. Roberto's fine ruffled shirt made the gag that stopped his mouth, his silk necktie the bond for his hands; the sleeves of his shirt served well to secure his feet. And there the sailor left him, stretched behind the trunk of a great oak, his overfed heart fluttering like a moth caught in wax.

"Quick—your foot!" Henderson whispered, mounting the seat encircling the tree-trunk where Don Roberto's betrothed prayed softly for deliverance among the leaves.

"You haven't killed him, Don Gabriel?" she asked.

She clambered down from her higher perch as she spoke, leaning to lay her hand on his shoulder. He felt the tremor of her body, the dread anxiety of her low-spoken word.

"He'll be ready for the wedding tomorrow, Miss Sprague, if you need him so soon," Gabriel assured her.

"I pray that day will never come!" she said, with such feeling that caution was forgotten. "But I would not have him dead, of all things dead at your hands, Don Gabriel," she added softly, her hand still on his shoulder, her breath on his cheek.

Henderson had found her unshod foot; he was replacing the slipper with such haste that impeded his work, anxious for her to come down and hurry back to her duenna's side. For his own road was calling to him; the moon marked its way over the hill among the greasewood and the sage.

"Now go," he said, having fastened the buckle on its silken strap across her vaulted instep. "Run for it, Miss Sprague!"

She came down lightly, her hand in his, her weight thrown on his shoulder, and stood so a moment, as if she had climbed to give him some sweet confidence unseen among the boughs.

"Avoid the man called Fernando—the one who found your shoe," he whispered, his breath short with something that was not fatigue from the fastening of her shoe.

"I know a way," she panted. "I shall be safe now."

It seemed as if shortness of breath were a contagion that had laid hold of both of them under the gray solemn robe that moonlit night. Both of them knew well enough that they had no moments to gamble away, but she lingered. Her hand was still cold in the chill of her past fright.

"Have you heard from the north?" she



asked eagerly, whispering close to his ear.

"The north?"

"I came to ask you, I wanted to know if you were—if you had a friend in the north who had sent you the news?"

"I haven't a friend in California," he replied, thinking in the same breath that he ought to be half way up the hill by now.

"One, at least," she corrected him, touching his shoulder in assuring comfort, speaking hurriedly, the necessity of the moment urging her now. "Where is Roberto? Have you hurt him much?"

"Behind that tree, not hurt. He's likely to get loose any moment—I must go. Good-by, Miss Sprague. My greatest wish is for your happiness."

"Go to my estate in the valley over there. It is near San Fernando mission, the Sprague ranch, everybody knows it. I'll be there before you, unless you are taking a horse."

"No."

"It is better that way, there would be a legal accusation if you took a horse. Come straight to my home, then. I have something to tell you—there is news from the north."

This last she emphasized as though she believed it had a meaning he would understand. He waited, standing as she left him on the seat, his head among the low branches, watching her until she disappeared under the pepper trees near the house. Then he leaped down and ran to the olive lane, and up the road by which he had arrived on a day that seemed to him now long ago, holding like a vassal to Don Abraham's stirrup, to be betrayed by the treacherous hospitality of that place.

Henderson was hatless; his finery, his light shoes, were not calculated to withstand the rigors of flight in the rough country where his small chance of safety lay. His velvet and bright satin would mark him in the eyes of every person that met him. He would leave a trail behind him like a fire. But he was confident; he was not flying friendlessly into the unknown.

He knew in a general way where San Fernando mission was, across the first range of hills in the valley of the same name, twenty miles or more away. There was little likelihood that they would start the pursuit of him tonight, hot as Roberto would be for revenge; the vast assurance of their mighty ability to reach out and drag a fugitive back with their thousand hands would hold them in their beds till

day. But the word of his escape was sure to be sent abroad by Indian messengers

the moment it was discovered.



Henderson proceeded on his way with a feeling of security in spite of his knowledge of this. He was certain there was no treachery in Miss

Sprague's offer of a refuge, and profession of friendship.

Don Felipe had spoken frequently of Roberto's betrothed, but never by name. She had been away, in school at Santa Barbara, Felipe had said. She must have come home only a day or two ago. That accounted for Roberto never having ridden to San Fernando, his valet at his back. Unlucky chance, thought Henderson, for then he would have known the road.

Where the olive lane ended, and the road swept away eastward to the pass and on its way to Buena Ventura and the north, Henderson paused. There was no break in the sound of festivity around the tables beneath the trees; it was certain that Roberto had not broken his insecure bonds and given the alarm. Here the fugitive must leave the highway and take a shorter line across the hills. Little chance that any would find his tracks in the goat path that he must follow up the first steep slope. At dawn Liseta would come with her flock; the tracks of his passing would be cut out of the path by two hundred scrambling hooves.

CHAPTER VII

A MESSENGER FROM SAN FERNANDO

DON ROBERTO rode into the courtyard at evening, dust on his shoulders. He flung himself from the saddle with impatience, throwing out his hands in baffled expression of emptiness when Don Abraham came hastily from the house to meet him.

"The earth has swallowed him," Don Roberto said.

He drew his shoulders up, lifted his eyebrows, pulled down the corners of his large flexible mouth, emphasizing his report of complete failure in his quest.

"You have made his grave, then? It is very good."

Don Abraham spoke with well simulated

gratification, as a man hearing good news. But that light of something in his eyes that seemed laughter and was not, told Roberto that he was being scorned.

"I have not made his grave," Roberto replied shortly, with surly tongue. "No man has seen him, he leaves no tracks."

"The earth opens to swallow a man but once," Don Abraham said gravely. "That is when it makes the little grin called the grave. As long as this sailor is not in his grave, he walks the ground to be brought back to this plantation and serve his time."

"I'll cut the heart out of him with a raw-hide when I find him!" Roberto said.

"Cut him till his back runs blood, you may; but his heart you will leave whole in his body to suffer for the great insult he has put upon this house. Never mind," laying his hand on Roberto's shoulder in comforting caress, "we shall find him. There is no way for him to escape but through the mountains into the desert. He had no arms, no money; his shoes are cut to pieces on the rocks by now; he runs lame, he is hungry. Soon he must come out of his place to beg food. Then the word will come, we shall have him in our hands."

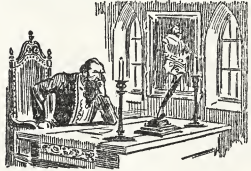
Don Felipe came for the horse, led it away unnoticed by father and son, clapped his genie signal for the young man who always seemed just out of sight in the warehouse. Don Abraham and his son, in close conversation, entered the dwelling.

This was the evening of the fourth day since Henderson's escape. The mystery of his complete vanishment troubled Don Abraham, not so much because his son had failed in the search which he headed, as that it seemed to show that his hitherto dependable machinery had failed and broken down. This would seem to indicate that the peon class was growing in defiance of the privileged few who had held them in subjugation so completely and so long. It was a state of affairs to cause a man to wrinkle his brow and consider, with beard bent upon his breast.

And so Don Abraham sat in what would have been called his library in an American house, but in this place termed office. Here the records of his business transactions were kept, here such books as the family owned, which were neither many nor important. Don Abraham's father had occupied the room for the same purpose, contriving it when he built the house.

This was a room of two tall, narrow Venetian windows set in the deep adobe

wall. There were dark beams of cedar overhead, a dark door of broad panels and great thickness shutting off the rest of the



house. There was a picture of a cavalier in a ruff and pointed beard, a sword at his side, his hand on the hilt, hanging in a dark deep frame between the windows. In the center of the room Don Abraham's strong oak table stood, two silver candlesticks flanking the great inkstand.

There was more to trouble Don Abraham than the thought of peon defiance in concealing a fugitive, or the revolution in the peon mind and conscience which would no longer permit one to seize and deliver an unhappy human chattel for the reward of five dollars. The greater thought that rose in the mind of Don Abraham like a cloud out of season upon the eye, was nothing less than that of American plotting and contriving to lay hold of California and add it to their domain.

That such plotting was going on, Don Abraham and others of his estate had proof; that it was being furthered and supported by men of his own nation who hoped to profit through it, and by Spaniards who had lost their lands, was more than suspected.

Proof was wanting there, but proof Don Abraham hoped to secure, to the happy hanging of some of his neighbors, the exile and expatriation of others. Then there would be land to divide as a reward among the patriots. The thought brought a smile to Don Abraham's face; it stood in twinkling reflection in his eyes long after its ripple had passed through his beard.

Roberto entered presently, refreshed by razor and clean garments. His face was gloomy for all the brightness of his raiment; there was a sulkiness in the corners of his drooping lips as of a resentful child. He sat at the end of the table, dark, handsome; soft in his habit of indolence, yet enduring from the very breed of him, more boy than man in spite of his years.

There was promise in his well-carried head, capability in his small, compact hands. Experience, hardship, renunciation by force, might harden this indulged boy into a formidable man, such as the gray, sharp-featured one across the table.

"You are wrong, father, when you think he roams the hills without a friend," Roberto said.

He scarcely had settled in the rough chair with rawhide seat, but with the words he got to his feet again, walked rapidly across the room, stood at a window where a last spear of sunlight came through filtered of its white strength by the smoky haze of the hills.

"You believe some American in the pueblo is hiding him?" Don Abraham asked.

He was unmoved by his son's perturbation. He watched the young man furtively, head bent, fingers interlaced meditatively at the tip of his beard. It was as if he tried an experiment in psychology, and waited the result.

"No, there is no American in the pueblo who would risk it. But there is another, not in the pueblo. He is not without a friend."

Don Abraham lifted his head, his eyes open wide. He put a hand to the table, leaning forward as if to rise.

"What is it you have learned today?" he asked.

Roberto turned from the window to stand with hands on the back of his chair, deliberating his next word, it seemed. He sat down, drew the chair close to the table, leaning confidentially toward his father, eye to the windows to see that nobody loitered near.

"There is something to be told to the shame of this house," he said, with such intense feeling that caused his father to stare. "There is a thing I have kept from you since the night of this ruffianly assault. Now you must hear it, but it burns my heart with shame to speak the words."

"How? What is this thing you preface with such terrible beginning?"

Don Abraham was thoroughly aroused. He glanced behind him to see that the door letting into the rest of the house was closed; and over his shoulder to make certain that the door opening out of it into the convenient courtyard that might, in time of stress, contain a man's saddled horse, did not show a crack.

"It is the infidelity and disgrace of one that was most dear," Roberto said, his head drooping with shame of the confession. "Helena—it was Helena who met

him under the tree that cursed night. It was Helena's slipper that Don Fernando picked up. She lost it when she fled."

"But 'no, no. Did you see her, my son?"

"I held the shoe a moment before the dog snatched it from me. It was one of the shoes I bought her in Mexico City, silk and fine kid. There is no mistake; there are no shoes of that kind in this country."

"And Don Fernando? You were not fool enough to betray this suspicion to him?"

"Don Fernando does not know, thank God! This affront to my honor is known only to you and me, and the guilty pair that shamed me. And by the breath of God I'll wash my hands in their blood before another sun goes down!"

"But Helena, that is not like her. I would not condemn Helena without greater proof than the circumstance of a shoe picked up under a tree. You did not see her run away. Perhaps she lost it, passing there for the air with Doña Carlota, and could not find it in the dark. I will make inquiry of Carlota. Let us be calm; let us wait."

"It is well enough for you to say all this, but I, who know better, want no further proof."

"It is not like Helena," Don Abraham persisted. "And grant that it was her shoe that caused you to suffer at this rough



fellow's hands—and I am not convinced yet that it was, for ships from Mexico bring many shoes—there would be no harm in the prank of meeting this sailor

for a word. Helena is more Yankee than Mexican. It is a strong blood. Captain Sprague was as much a gentleman as ever came to California from any land."

"No harm in meeting him!" Roberto repeated bitterly. It seemed that he had not heard his father beyond these words.

"No harm. It is the custom of Americans to permit their young of the opposite sexes together in all places, at all hours. Custom gives it a different color in their eyes than ours. It is likely she only wanted to practice a little English with one fresh from Boston, to get from him the latest

words. She has dreams of going there some day, she doesn't want to go with a stiff tongue."

"It isn't her native speech, her native land. She is Mexican, as I am. Captain Sprague was a Mexican citizen; there is no Yankee custom that can absolve her."

"I think she is innocent of any wrong intention, however bold her deed, if she is guilty of meeting him as you charge, my son. There is no smirch on Helena, she is a good girl, and a rich one. I cannot permit you to think of throwing aside this betrothal on account of a foolish episode such as troubles you so deeply, Roberto. It is our secret. Call it a child's prank and forgive it."

"And this Yankee sailor? Do you expect me to forgive him, as well?"

Don Abraham sat in meditation a little while, his beard bent upon his breast. When he looked up presently there was that reflection of inner laughter in his eyes.

"The devil first tempted woman under a tree," he said. "If Adam had killed the evil in Eden, it would have been for the happiness of mankind."

Roberto sprang to his feet, his nostrils twitching, his face white.

"I know where to find him!" he said. "This country could not hide a man four days without a strong friend to cover him. Give me permission to go and demand him at her door."

"Without absolute knowledge that he is there, it would be an affront that Helena never would forgive," Don Abraham returned in politic softness.

"Forgive! Helena forgive! I swear to you, Don Abraham my father, that I will not have her, polluted by his kiss."

"This is folly," Don Abraham reproved him coldly. "What is a kiss more or less, if he kissed her? The sailor never met her alone, never spoke a word to her. But I give him to you. Do with him what your desire leads you to do—when you find him."

"If we find that she is hiding him, will that be proof enough for you of her guilt?"

"It is preposterous. She could not hide him, nobody could hide him!" Don Abraham declared, but contrary to his own deep conviction that somebody, indeed, must be concealing the fugitive. "He has crawled into a cave in the hills; hunger will drive him out tomorrow."

"It is a thing that touches a man's honor." Roberto judged Helena as Helena

judged him and his kind, as revealed in her significant speech to Henderson, explaining why she had hidden herself in the tree. Men were not trusted alone with women in the Spanish-Mexican society of that time; they are not trusted in any greater degree in the same society today.

"Proof would be necessary," Don Abraham insisted, with such firmness that Roberto knew could not be shaken. "You did not see her, the touch of a shoe which seemed of the same material you brought from the capital."

"Sixteen dollars, gold, they cost me!"

"Such evidence is weaker than the testimony of a blind man. It does not convict Helena in my judgment, I will not consent to your throwing away her lands, her herds, her gold won by that magician Sprague as if he clutched it out of the air. It is too much for a trifle of suspicion to wreck. When you cool, when you are reasonable, you will see it as I do."

"In my own heart she stands convicted. There is not another pair of shoes like that this side of the capital."

"Who comes?" Don Abraham asked, leaning to listen as the sound of someone riding into the courtyard in haste passed the window like a gust of wind.

Roberto turned to the window to see. The rider had passed; only the dust of his swift arrival could be seen. He opened the window and leaned out.

"Felipe is coming with the intelligence," he announced.

"It is time for the fish to show himself in the net," Don Abraham said, going to the door which opened into the courtyard. "I knew we must have news of him soon."

Roberto stood by the table, lips compressed, hands clenched, as if he struggled against vengeful emotions. Don Abraham turned from the door, and closed it. He stood a moment reading the written message his *mayordomo* had put into his hand.

"It is a message from Doña Carlota, at the San Fernando ranch," he said, looking his son straight in the eyes. Don Abraham stood then a moment, taking his breath in such long inspiration as a man draws it when he fortifies himself for some tremendous ordeal.

"Your suspicions are confirmed. She is hiding him," he said.



CHAPTER VIII

THE TEETH OF A MAN

DOÑA CARLOTA, cousin of Don Abraham, kept her candle burning late that night. She drew the drapery of her chamber window aside to show that the house was awake, herself seated discreetly out of sight of any passing eye. With crochet needle and fine silk thread she worked upon the mantilla that had employed her fingers many months, and would so employ them until the ripening of grapes.

There was a weight of trouble upon the breast of Doña Carlota that night, a haven broad enough to harbor many troubles, yet in which few had come to anchor in her placid years. She was as round and fat as an old hen pigeon, small in the face, her chin merged into her neck, her black hair pulled rigorously back from her shallow forehead in what seemed an attempt to give sternness to a countenance that had no more severity in it than a cake. Even trouble could do no more than give it a comical little look of appeal.

Between love and duty Doña Carlota had suffered these two days. At the last she yielded to duty, as she would have deferred to religion, and the thing was done. Now she waited as it drew on toward midnight, listening for the sound of horses coming from the south. When she felt a flood of drowsiness coming over her, threatening to smother her like a clam on the beach, she fumbled beneath the half-finished mantilla for her rosary. Yet she had quakings and doubts; she suffered tremors of cold fears.

At ten minutes before midnight Doña Carlota believed she had expected too much of Dan Abraham; he would not come that night. At five minutes past the hour, as she stood with hand on the drawn drapery to let it fall and shut the candlelight from the road, a dog barked before an Indian shepherd's hut. His alarm was taken up, as a cock's crow goes onward over the land from straining throat to throat, from the edge of the world in the west to the very shores of dawn. Men came riding into the dooryard. Don Abraham was at the door.

Doña Carlota hastened to open to the magistrate's command, even to the command of his presence, before his hand was lifted to the panel.

"So you have come," she said. "May Jesus protect us all! Enter, Don Abraham."

"There is no cause for your perturbation, my good cousin," Don Abraham said, laughing at her magnification of a thing that he considered only commonplace, troublesome, small. "A runaway peon is not a thing to disturb your tranquility."

"But the anger of Helena! She will blast us with the passion that has come to her from that terrible captain. When she knows that I sent for you——"

"Peace, peace, Doña Carlota. Who is going to tell her, but yourself?"

"She is so shrewd, she can see through a wall, Don Abraham."

Don Abraham laughed again, seeming in pleasant humor for one who had ridden so far from his bed. He pinched Doña Carlota's cheek, finding no trouble to get his finger's full.

"A wall is another thing," he said. Doña Carlota was not quick at a jest. She did not understand his mirth.

Roberto entered, a pistol at his belt; Simon, the teamster, stood in the beam of Doña Carlota's candle outside the door.

"Where is the Yankee dog?" Roberto demanded, harsh, disrespectful, his hat on his head.

"Gently," Don Abraham cautioned. "Not so loud. Lead us to the room where he is hidden. The house is guarded at every door, he cannot escape."

"The house, the room?" Doña Carlota gasped in scandalized amazement. "Do you believe, Don Abraham, that my niece would conceal a man in her house? Jesus save——"

"Where, then?" Roberto demanded.

"I do not know, Don Roberto, but somewhere on the ranch. The Yankee *mayordomo* can tell you that."

"A tree would tell as much!" Don Abraham said. "Call Helena."

"She has heard, she is coming. There is her candle in the hall!" Doña Carlota pressed her elbows to her sides, drew her shoulders as if trying to shrink upon herself.

Helena appeared, lifting her candle high to peer beneath it at the intruders upon her midnight peace. The flaring bottom of the candlestick threw a shadow on her face, only her hair coming into the light. She was draped in a long, dark voluminous cloak, her arms bare in its wide sleeves, the white frill of her night-dress peeping at her throat out of its austere envelopment.

"It is a late hour for a visit, Don Abraham, Roberto," she said looking from one to the other in questioning surprise. "I

heard horsemen in my patio. What does it mean?"

"We have come to you for a man who has run away from a debt, like a thief," Don Abraham replied. "Your *mayordomo* is hiding him on your ranch, I have been told. It is to your authority I appeal, as a magistrate of the law, Helena, to compel the delivery of this man."



"My *mayordomo* is only obeying my orders," Helena replied.

She placed her candle on the deep window-sill, gathering her cloak closer about her neck, standing so, clasping the mantle delicately, its loose sleeve slipping down to the bend of her arm.

"You are humane, but mistaken," Don Abraham chided her gently. "This man is a ruffianly sailor who ran away from his ship; he has committed a murderous assault on my son. He is entirely unworthy your protection and tender sympathy."

"I am sorry that it was necessary for Roberto to suffer at his hands," she said, yet withholding from Roberto even the sympathy of her glance. "I have talked with the young sailor, Mr. Henderson. He is a gentleman, he does not deserve the hard usage you have given him, any more than he does the hard name, Don Abraham. I intended to go down and see you about his case tomorrow."

"Then I rejoice that I have spared you so much fatigue," Don Abraham said, inclining his thin body in graceful obeisance, *sombrero* in his hand.

"I am sure Mr. Henderson has repaid you, many times over, all that he ever owed you legally," Helena said. "He has told me that he came into your service in February; it is now July. You cannot rate the services of an American with those of an ignorant peon, Don Abraham. Be generous; call it paid."

"What he owes me is another matter," Roberto said.

He had found the grace to remove his hat on Helena's appearance; in his fierce show of hungry vengeance now he let it fall, the hand that had held it clenched, the other on his pistol.

Helena surveyed him in this dramatic

pose with cool curiosity, running her eyes over him as if searching the cause of his animosity against a man whom he had degraded to a servile station.

"Although I might forgive his debt, under such kindly argument by his lovely advocate, that would not free him of his assault upon my son. But you are mistaken in the matter of his debt to me; the man has lied."

"He cannot escape," Roberto said fiercely, bending toward her as he spoke, his face flushed, his eyes drawn small.

"It is impossible for him to reach the north and join the Americans who plot against our country there," Don Abraham declared. "The road is guarded well, he cannot pass."

"I doubt if he thinks of escaping—to the north, or anywhere, at present, Don Abraham. A man who has done no wrong has nothing to fear."

"There is no reason in the heart of youth, only fire and sympathy," Don Abraham said. "Yankee men of this common type are brutes. This one I saw strike his captain down with a broken oar, like a savage. What weapon he held when he assaulted my son we do not know, but the bruise of it is still to be seen on his face. No, the man cannot be permitted to go free and unpunished. The safety of the community demands his correction."

"He told me he struck Roberto with his hand, and no weapon," Helena said, indignant over the charge, unwise in her revelation, as she realized almost immediately.

"So, you have been alone with him again!" Roberto accused.

"Silence!" Don Abraham commanded, turning stern face upon his son.

"I was not alone with him; John Toberman was present."

"What cruelty to say she was alone with a man!" said Doña Carlota. "The four angels who guard her chamber are not more innocent, Don Roberto."

"Then if you will call Toberman and order him to lead us to the sailor's hiding-place," Don Abraham suggested, yet with the imperative inflection of a command.

"I heard him among your men, he is not one to sleep when an invasion like this is going on. Call at the door, or send Simon around to the patio."

John Toberman, *mayordomo* of the ranch, appeared at the front door presently with Simon, who had bounded away at Don Abraham's nod to find him. He came into the light of Doña Carlota's can-

dle, which she still held in her hand, its flame on a level with her stubby nose. He was bareheaded, his pistols were belted around him, his shirt was open on his grizzled neck. He came into the house without ceremony, no show of deference and little of respect, in his bearing toward Don Abraham and his son.

Toberman was a broad-shouldered, lean Yankee, once mate of the ship that Cap-



tain Sprague had commanded. He was sixty years of age, or more, his heavy, bushy hair of a pepper-and-salt gray, his bearded face, dark as a Mexican's, keen and alert. He stood in the door, severe,

questioning; a cloud of displeasure on his face.

"What does this clatter around here at this time of the night mean, Garvanza?" he demanded, fixing the magistrate with searching eyes.

"In the name of the law to demand a fugitive who is to be judged for his crimes," Don Abraham replied.

"You want that young man Henderson, do you? Well, if you think you're goin' to drag him back to work for you till the United States army marches in here and sets the peons free, you're mistaken. If you want to try him for slappin' your son's jaw, set the date and I'll guarantee he'll be on hand."

"There is more than you understand," Don Abraham said coldly. "You are a Mexican citizen, it is treason for you to talk of an American army taking possession of this country. Bear that in mind when you open your mouth hastily in the future, Toberman."

Toberman seemed to grow two inches as he drew himself up, his chest swelling with no knowing what defiance. Helena lifted her hand, slightly, seeming to speak to him with her eyes. The blast of words that might have knocked Don Abraham off his feet, and haled Toberman into court for trial on a serious charge, was checked. Toberman contented himself with adjusting his hands on his hips, in a pose that was at once expressive of defiance and disdain, and standing so in silence.

"Where is the fugitive hiding?" Don Abraham demanded.

"You're free to go and find out," said Toberman.

"The time has come to teach these Yankees who are masters of this country," Roberto said, turning to his father in fury. "Why will you temporize with them, permit them to throw insult and defiance in your face? Give me permission and I will find a way to make this man answer, and answer with respect."

"Peace!" Don Abraham commanded, yet with more admiration than severity. "There is a way; in due time it will be seen. Toberman, the iron hand of the law is over you; it must not, it shall not, be defied. I will give you until midday tomorrow to produce this fugitive. Go about the business immediately."

"Don Abraham, you have no right to come into my house with such commands!" Helena protested.

"Garvanza, ever since the new governor has been established in the pueblo, with the thieves and off-scourings of the Mexican prisons in his military force, you've swelled up like a toad," Toberman said. He moved forward a step as he spoke, his hand lifted, pointed finger driving his words into the magistrate's face. "I'm not taking orders from the governor, I'm not taking orders from you. I get my orders from this little lady right here, and from nobody else."

Toberman glared around as he pronounced this defiance of the constituted authorities, hands back again on his hips in convenient reach of his pistols, a fearless man who had passed through many conflicts, to whom the imminence of another was nothing but an incident in his day.

"Don Abraham, I will pay you what this fugitive owes you, according to your own reckoning of it," Helena offered, drawing a little closer to the magistrate, closing the little group in the wide, low-walled hall. It seemed as if defiance and appeal pressed upon Don Abraham in the same breath.

"It cannot be permitted," Don Abraham replied.

He retreated a step from her advance, from her white arm outstretched in supplication for permission to do this humane service.

"He is a stranger, far from home, without money, without friends," she pleaded. "I will pay it in his name—seven times the amount, Don Abraham, if you demand it."

"It cannot be adjusted in this manner," Don Abraham refused. "Prepare quarters in this house for me and my son," he

directed, turning gruffly to Doña Carlota.

Doña Carlota started, her growing nervousness reaching its climax in the order, given with such affront to the hospitality of that house. She shifted the position of her candle to look past it at Helena, plainly asking instructions from one whose authority she held in greater fear than Don Abraham's wrath.

"You will know where to accommodate them," Helena said coldly. "There will be nothing more tonight, John," to Toberman, in kindness that had no taint of patronage.

Toberman left the house the way he had entered, Don Abraham's order in little prospect of being carried out, that was plain. Doña Carlota had hastened down the hall to open the guest rooms; Don Abraham turned to the door, where he leaned out peering into the dark, as if watching Toberman. He summoned Simon in low voice, and stood there for some time talking with his teamster in hurried manner, Simon answering with short word here and there interspersed in hasty eagerness.

"So, you would buy a lover!" Roberto said, his breath audible in his nostrils as he leaned to whisper the insult in Helena's ear.

Helena drew away from him, her cloak gathered close, afraid of him for the fierce cruelty of his eyes. Roberto, reached quickly, roughly grasping her wrist where her hand held the mantle at her throat.

"There is a dagger for a heart so false!" he said.

Don Abraham turned from the door as Roberto flung her hand away with such gesture of contempt, such complete abandonment, that the magistrate stood stiffly, his limbs checked in their function by his great amazement.

"This is not well," he said sternly.

"False!" Helena repeated in scorn. "Who is it that has mooned and sighed under windows, and caught flowers thrown by coquettes—and worse? What have I heard from the capital of the doings of Don Roberto that would turn my heart to him or make him dear? Roberto, if there ever was any obligation to you on my part, I have been absolved from it long ago."

"You were betrothed to me; it was a holy compact," Roberto said.

His voice shook with sickness of the shame he believed had been put upon him; he stood clenching his hands and scowling, ready, it seemed, to begin the chastisement that he had threatened.

"This is folly," Don Abraham said, at-

tempting to soothe their young passion



with the unctious of his steady word. "All the world knows there was a betrothal between you two, years ago."

"It wasn't of my making," Helena reminded him, bitterly accusing in the recollection of that bargain and conveyance, after the country's custom.

"What you and my father arranged between you when I was a child cannot bind me now, Don Abraham. I repudiate it, I throw it in your face!"

"It cannot be done so lightly," Don Abraham said, thinking of the lands and herds, and the gold that the Yankee captain had plucked out of air like a magician, all now in the hands of this girl, all now about to take wing and fly out of his family's reach forever. "It cannot be done so easily, Helena. There is much to consider before pulling down shame upon my house, disgrace upon your own."

"Disgrace! And she would buy a lover for a price!" Roberto groaned, burning already in the fire of humiliation.

"It is only the—disgraceful sort you know so well, Roberto, who have love to sell for a price," she said. "Don Abraham, I leave you to your repose."

"Youth is too quick," said Don Abraham regretfully, as Helena disappeared down the dark hall, leaving her candle on the window-sill to light them to such repose as the night's upheaval had left them. "Tomorrow you will repair the damage with soft words."

"Tomorrow," said Roberto portentously, "it will be another thing. I am no longer a boy. I have grown the teeth of a man this night; I can bite."

CHAPTER IX

DON ROBERTO BITES

ROBERTO found the air of his room stifling, the confinement of its walls oppressive. It seemed that the teeth of a man, which he had become

cognizant of possessing only that night ached for something to fasten upon and try their strength, urging him out into the open with savage restlessness.

His door opened into the wide patio between the wings of the house, where an immense pepper tree rose high above the roof, its softly draped foliage blue-tinted in the moonlight like a vast, still smoke. There was no light in the house as Roberto stood a little while in the patio drowned in the gloom of the great tree's shadow; if Helena's conscience troubled her on account of this night's rebellion, she hid the shame of it in the dark.

That was as it should be, Roberto thought. It would have been satisfying to him to know that she was bowed in remorseful shame at her prayers; he suspected, with resentful anger, that she was asleep in her bed.

All was as quiet outside the house as within. The men who had ridden from the ranch, but few in number, mean-spirited fellows all, excepting Simon alone, had found places to stretch themselves and sleep. It was nothing to them whether Gabriel Henderson went free or was taken, nothing to them whether the power and dignity of Don Abraham's house rose or fell. Vengeful, bitter, contemptuous of them all, Roberto went to the front of the house and into the broad road that passed before it, the fire of his passion burning the desire for sleep.

Along this road a little way toward the north he walked, striding rapidly, his spurs clicking at his heels. The land in this valley was sandy, soft, almost white as snow in the bright moonlight, far different from the black, tenuous adobe of his father's homestead. Between the little groves of robles which grew in this rich valley the erratic highway ran, the royal road, the king's highway, of the old mission days.



The Indians made it first between their villages, long before the zeal of the Franciscan fathers brought them to that shore; the traffic of the missionaries broadened it, and gave it the dignity of its name.

Roberto felt that his heart was nested in this valley, toward which he had yearned sometimes among the dissipations of the capital. He had intended, all the years of his betrothal to Helena, to establish the dignity of his house here on the land that

the Yankee captain, who had been accepted as an equal of the best in that country, had acquired by grant for some service to the Mexican government, real or contrived, which was forgotten now. But the land remained, no matter for the evanescent memory of those who gave it or him who received. It yielded as no other ranch in that part of the country under the wise management of John Toberman, who had given up herding ships on the sea for the herding of cattle on the land.

It was a wrench to give up that plantation, with its green *vegas*, its stream of living water that came down from the mountains to refresh the great herds, its groves of oak and sycamore trees, its barley and wheat fields, its mansion by the roadside. Yet honor was dearer to a man than lands and herds. At least custom made it so, Roberto said, beginning to feel his anger against Helena diminish in weighing it against what it would cost him. Custom was wrong in many things, as the constant abandonment of old usages proved. Custom was cruel when it separated a man from his dreams and desires in such manner as this.

Roberto's feet found a slower pace, the boiling turmoil of his anger cooled, as these considerations assailed him. Helena was only guilty of being modern; the Yankee blood of that old captain had drowned the Castilian in her veins. It was wrong to judge her by the standards of that country, as it would be wrong for him to throw away a fortune on no sounder proof than this. It was a thing to pace slowly up and down here in the shadow of the roadside oaks and consider, hands behind the back like a thinking man.

A man must leave home, hunger for it, sigh for it, to return and perceive its beauties hitherto unknown, to feel its friendliness as he felt it here tonight. His heart rose in him, a tenderness of poetic feeling blended out the last shred of his anger, as he stood in the moonlight at the margin of the oak trees' shade, viewing the beauty of that place.

In the south stood the low chain of hills separating this broad valley from that in which the pueblo of Los Angeles lay; close at hand on the north, higher mountains rose, the crumbling granite ledges on their rough sides and summits glistening like snow.

Dark, repellent, the canyons of these mountains appeared, rough and unfriendly their steep and mangy slopes. No trees graced them, little verdure. They seemed

the great cinder-heap of a burning world



that the sea had rushed upon and extinguished in some long-distant age. Even with their austerity chastened in the

moonlight, there was no invitation to man in the face they presented.

Yet Roberto knew that their sides were covered with low-growing shrubs, with sweet-scented plants, with sage and holly and honey-bearing flowers, which left a man's clothing perfumed by their touch when he threaded the tangle of their baring limbs. Green things grew there which sheep and cattle fattened on; the sage-bloom called the bees to gather such honey as never gladdened man's tongue in any other land. There was a great beneficence, a gentle kindness, even in the forbidding hills.

To the east Roberto could not see far, the vision hemmed by trees, but there he knew the valley came down to a point, like a river flowing between the hills. To the west it broadened for miles, closing again before coming quite to the sea. In that direction the road turned from San Fernando Mission, threading to Santa Barbara and, in its weary course, to Monterey.

It was clear in the valley this night, not a curl of mist drifted along the hills, a sweet languor in its placidity that embraced a man and made him glad. He could dissemble, he could put pride aside, stoop to soft words to beguile a foolish girl's ear, for the blessings of that place. This knowledge that he had teeth to bite made a man wiser, fortified his courage like a pistol in the belt.

With these reflections over him, the thought of his vengeance against Gabriel Henderson put aside for that hour, Roberto walked on up the road, thinking nothing of the time, sleep a stranger to his eyes. There grew mesquite and screw-bean by the roadside, cactus and chaparral, and grass in bunches that put up tall plumes. Soon Roberto was far beyond sight of the ranch-house, his eyes on the white road, the weight of his new manhood upon him making him grave.

Roberto was startled out of his meditations by the beat of a horse's feet in the road to the north. Before the rider came in sight around one of the goat-path wind-

ings of the highway, Roberto knew that the horse had been ridden hard, and far. He stood in the middle of the road, curious to know who had come from a distance in such pressure, whither he was bound, and the mission that urged him to ride in haste through the night.

The rider halted suddenly when he rounded the turn of the road, seeing his way blocked by a man. He seemed to hesitate for a moment between advance and flight. Roberto, pricking with a keen suspicion that all was not honest with the rider, hailed him.

"Advance!" he said, in commanding voice.

The rider lifted his right hand in signal that he understood, and came forward slowly.

"Can you direct me to the Sprague ranch?" he inquired, in the speech of a common man. Roberto saw that he wore the dress of a cattle-herder. His carriage in the saddle fixed him as one of that calling.

"It is close by," Roberto replied, laying hold of the bridle rein as a man might do a friend's. Yet there was nothing of friendliness in the young man's bearing; much of suspicious severity, and question of the other's right to pass. "Who is it you have business with there at this late hour?"

"It is a man's own business, whatever it may be," the horseman replied, undisturbed by Roberto's hostility. "Would you deny a man the road, like a bandit?"

"I am a kinsman of Miss Sprague, I have the right to stop any stranger who comes looking for her at this hour of the night. If your business is honest, you will not hesitate to tell me what it is."

"You might be her brother?"

"No, not her brother. I am a distant relative, but my authority is not to be questioned."

"Only a distant relative!" said the rider, with a short laugh. "But you stop a man in the road with a pistol under your fingers. If you were a near relative, a brother or a cousin, maybe you would shoot a man if he even looked in the lady's direction? You are too quick for me, young gentleman. Let go my bridle—I must be on my way."

He seemed to hold Roberto in little seriousness, in trifling account. His teeth flashed in a quick smile; he sat in a posture of graceful indulgence, one hand on his hip, his bridle reins held high in the other.

"Who sent you?" Roberto demanded with all the sternness of his privileged class.

"A man with fingers on his hands, and money in them to pay for what he wanted. That's enough for me to know; it will have to be enough for you."

"Where do you come from, impertinent scoundrel?"

"Have you heard of Monterey, little man?" the cattle-herder asked, patronizingly insolent, as a free man who knows his strength and despises that of another. "Well then, I come from Monterey. I bring letters for the young lady. Whether they are from a lover, that is another thing. Now let go my bridle—permit me."

The man leaned as he spoke, laying hold of Roberto's wrist to remove his hand



from the rein. His cool insolence, his impertinent disregard of any force that his challenger might use to prevent his going, seemed to Roberto a mighty insult to his new manhood, as it doubtless was intended to be.

"Get down!" Roberto commanded, presenting his pistol at the rider's ribs.

"Presently—at the lady's door," the messenger replied, his teeth white in the moonlight as he laughed.

With the words he set spur to his horse, waking in the agony of the cruel thrust the spirit that seemed beaten out of the weary animal. It bounded forward, the dust of its high-flung hooves in Roberto's face.

The chaparral echoed in the placidity of that night. Don Roberto had snapped his teeth.

CHAPTER X

THE MAGISTRATE SPEAKS

ONLY know that Don Roberto has killed a man, that they have brought his body wrapped in tentcloth and laid it near the olive press, under the trees. That is all I know."

Doña Carlota was not greatly moved by the event. Dead men had come in her way before, and men who had fallen by violence. She was less agitated in the relation of this news than over the prospect last night that her betrayal of the Ameri-

can's presence on the ranch might be discovered by her niece. She was keen enough to see that the agitation had passed to the other side of the hearth, so to speak. It was Helena's face that grew white, and set in little lines of pain, when this news of Don Roberto's exploit was related.

"You didn't hear them say who it was, when, where, it happened?" Helena inquired.

She sat as she had started from sleep at her aunt's summons to hear this news, the bedclothes flung aside, her hair showing on her shoulders, dread and anxiety staring from her eyes.

"It may be the one they came to find. It was of about that length—I saw it as they carried it by the window. I'll send Rosa with coffee—"

"No. But, Auntie Carlota, ask them. Find out who it was, why it was that Roberto—"

"There is Don Abraham calling me, roaring again like a bear. These men! What a trouble!"

Doña Carlota left hurriedly, the sound of Don Abraham's voice welling as she opened Helena's chamber door.

"Doña Carlota, Doña Carlota!" the summons sounded. And fainter, as the door closed, as if he had turned his back, "Doña Carlota!" with impatient clapping of the hands.

Doña Carlota made no haste to appear before her kinsman and learn his pleasure. She stood a moment at Helena's door, a look of supreme satisfaction in her face, crossed the hall to the door opening into the patio and stood a little while looking at the tender morning sun in the leaves of the pepper tree.

"I was right, I was justified; my conscience is clear," she said. "Yes, Don Abraham. I am here, I am here."

Helena hastened her toilet, oppressed by a dread that made her morning dark. Sleep had been long coming to her last night; she had lain planning and devising, her mind flooded by this breaking down of traditional submission. When sleep came, it had locked her fast, she had heard nothing of the coming and going when the body of the slain man was brought and laid beneath the olive trees. Had she slept while they hunted this trusting stranger and killed him at her very door?

The thought wrung her heart with poignant regret. It seemed equal to betrayal to offer a man sanctuary that she could not insure, a refuge that had become a trap. She had not looked deep enough into Doña

Carlota's crafty eyes when she related this tragic intelligence; not deep enough to see that her purpose was only one of leading her young ward on to the betrayal of what hid in her heart. Now Doña Carlota knew; she knew better than Helena herself, or more than Helena would have owned, at least, if confronted with the demand of her own conscience.

Doña Carlota was back at Abrahan's door while she was still braiding her hair. This time with a summons from Don Abrahan that amounted to a command. As quickly as she could dress she was to attend the pleasure of Don Abrahan in the parlor. It must be something terrible, Doña Carlota said, now unmistakably alarmed. There was a look in Don Abrahan's face to make a woman's heart sink low.

Don Abrahan sat at a small table near the window, papers spread before him; Roberto waited at the door like a butler, closing it behind Helena sharply when she entered, shutting Doña Carlota out with summary rudeness. Don Abrahan rose, tall, gaunt, his roomy clothing loose upon his limbs. Helena stood in questioning hesitation, looking from Don Abrahan to his son. She seemed a stranger in her own house, these two had taken such authoritative control.



Don Abrahan turned his hand in slow, graceful motion to a chair, remaining standing in his punctilious way of deferential grace until she was seated. Roberto stood with his back to the door, his pistol at his side.

This house was not so pretentious as Don Abrahan's, there being nothing grand in its proportions at all, compared with the bright and beautiful homes which stand in that same valley today. It was a squat, flat building of gray adobe, severely simple, conforming in all particulars with the traditional plan of houses of the gentry in California of that period, following the older traditions of an older land. The form was that of a letter E without the centre bar. All rooms faced upon the

patio, with doors admitting to it. In the front of the house there was the hall in the centre, a room on either hand; in the wings the kitchen and sleeping rooms.

The parlor in which this small party gathered this morning was not a large room. The morning sun did not brighten it, the house facing the west. Its cedar beams across the ceiling, its dark draperies and sombre furnishings gave it a solemnity fitting to a solemn hour.

And this seemed to Helena a most solemn and portentous hour, indeed. Don Abrahan's face was grave, his demeanor judicially severe. Roberto, standing with arms folded on his breast, appeared like one waiting to enforce the judgment of some stern and pitiless court. They might have been officers of the Holy Inquisition, Helena thought, judged by the unsympathetic harshness of their faces, their fixed determination upon the business that lay in their hands.

Don Abrahan sat silent a little spell, drawing the written sheets of paper together before him, arranging them in a way that seemed to tell of his thoughts being detached from the action of his hands. Helena's heart was laboring as if it lay under a stone; her limbs trembled, her hands were cold. She did not know that Don Abrahan was a master of suspense; that every movement of his hand was calculated, every moment of silence gauged against the perturbation of her breast.

"There is a matter of gravity upon our hands, Helena, my desired," Don Abrahan began, his measured words, his slowly lifted head, his deliberate, searching eyes, all adding to the weight of that cold stone which seemed pressing upon the warmth of her redundant heart. "If I have your permission, I will speak."

"Assuredly, Don Abrahan."

"We spoke last night, Helena, of your betrothal to my son."

Don Abrahan paused; his eyes sought the papers on the table, the first of which he lifted, seeming to read beneath.

"That is ended, Don Abrahan," Helena said, the tremor of her heart in her words.

"It is a heavy thing to speak of lightly, and in haste, as I said last night, my dear. Let us go back a little way, let us reconsider. Do you realize the affront, the humiliation, the insult, you are laying on my son, my house, by this hasty, capricious act?"

"There is neither insult nor humiliation intended, sir. I realize that I could not be happy with your son. That is the first

consideration. I could not honor him, love him, or even respect him, as a woman should the man she marries."

Helena's spirit began to lift, the dread to ease its compression on her bosom. She looked Don Abraham in the eyes, a flush enlivening her pale cheeks.

"In what way has my son forfeited his claim upon your respect, my love?"

"I told you last night."

"Rumors may easily grow into slanders between here and the capital," Don Abraham said, in stern reproval. "If we are to credit all our suspicions, believe all we hear, accept every small circumstance as damning evidence, we will soon drive happiness and tranquility out of our lives. Who of us is pure in all things? Who has not transgressed?"

"The source of my information cannot be impeached," Helena replied. "If you have called this solemn court to try me, Don Abraham, you have exceeded any and all authority that I grant to your position and your years. I am free, I am in my right mind. I will not marry Roberto. You cannot force me to it, even with your valiant son guarding the door!"

"The small frivolities, the mild indiscretions—all this the world grants a man in his youth, Helena. It is different with a man."

"Let it pass; there will be many ready to accept the defense. As for me, I cannot, Don Abraham."

"It is strange that you should come to this conclusion at this late hour, Helena. There was no word of it before the last day of the fiesta."

"Two days after I left your house, Don Abraham, letters came from my friends in the capital. But I doubt, even without the things revealed to me—"

"Lies, slanders," said Don Abraham, disdain in the swelling of his nostrils, the rocking of his head. "Have I not been young? It is the fashion to slander such."

"Your son has an able advocate, Don Abraham," she said, smiling a bit scornfully. "Do we have to go on with the discussion, only to come to nothing in the end?"

"It is soon done," Don Abraham declared with sudden sternness, rising to his feet. "My son stands ready to forget the past, out of his great and honorable love for you."

Helena sprang up.

"Generous gentleman!" she mocked. "And if I refuse to marry him, the penalty will be publicity, disgrace."

"No. A gentleman learns early in life when to keep silent," Don Abraham re-



turned. "You will reconsider your hasty words?"

"No!"

"You will think slowly, and speak slower. My son forgives the escapade of the oak tree."

"Forgives! What absolution can he show for his own crimes?"

"He will forget what has passed, he will accept this restored compact as if you never had broken it by word or deed."

"How magnificent!"

"Do you yield?"

"No, Don Abraham, I do not yield. There is no act of purgation, there is no fire of penance, that can cleanse him in my sight. To add to his other crimes, it is said he killed a man last night. Who was it? Why was it done, here at my very door?"

"We are coming to that," Don Abraham said.

He motioned her to her chair again, an invitation that passed unheeded. Seeing that she did not sit, he remained standing, lifting the papers from the table.

"It becomes necessary to tell you now what I have known these three days," Don Abraham said. "The insolent aggressions of the Americans have driven our patient nation to resent them at last. War has been declared; battles have been fought on the Rio Grande. The triumphant Mexican army is sweeping forward to Washington. The man whom my son challenged in the road last night was a spy, carrying intelligence to spies. This correspondence before me was taken from him. Part of it was addressed to you."

Don Abraham held up the written sheets, half a dozen or so in number. Helena put out her hand quickly, more in appeal than demand. Don Abraham pressed the correspondence against his breast, denying her, lifting a checking hand. His face was forbidding, his accusing voice was cold.

"I have suspected Toberman a long time of plotting with the Americans and trai-

tors in the North, but I lacked absolute proof until this day. It was beyond the limit of reason to include you, Helena."

Helena was not thinking of herself that moment; she was not crushed and confounded as her silence might be misunderstood. Her heart was beating fast, the warm blood was surging into her brain, quickening it to all the alert resourcefulness that was her heritage. Toberman had escaped, Toberman was safe, thank God! That was her thought, that was her exultation. Toberman was riding free. For herself and her peril, she had no thought.

"Perilous as your situation is, Helena," Don Abraham said, "there is a door open to your salvation. You are young, you are under the influence of this man who has had your affairs in his hands since your father's death. He has misled you, he has brought you to this unwittingly, he——"

"No, Don Abraham," she denied, lifting her head proudly.

There was something in her voice, the ring of it, the proud defiance, that started Roberto out of his pose before the door. His folded arms fell to his sides, his fingers shaped as if to snatch a weapon. He moved a step toward her, his eyes distended in astonishment of the spirit revealed.

"I offer you this door," Don Abraham said, unheeding her defiance. "I trust in my heart you will accept the exit from this most grave situation. Let this compact between you and my son continue, let us

proceed at once to the priest and celebrate the marriage. My son has begged me to offer you this out of the manly love he bears you, Helena, and from no other consideration. Accept,

and you will be relieved of this taint of treason. It will be an easy matter in such case to place the burden of guilt where it belongs, on the head of the traitor who involved you in this, innocently, we——"

"Roberto, forgive me!" Helena begged, turning to the young man impulsively, a light in her eyes that he never had seen before. "I have misjudged you. You must have a true, an honorable affection for me to offer me this."

"May God judge between us!" said Ro-

berto, with such feeling that his words trembled on his lips.

"There is something in you better than I knew," she confessed, the honesty of her nature not permitting the covering of one little spark of gratitude. "I thought all the time you were anxious only to have my money and my lands, but this—but this I——"

"The lands? Curse them! The gold? Sink it in hell!" Roberto said, flinging his arms wide, his head thrown back in his dramatic fervor.

"Forgive me if I have wronged you by word or thought, Roberto. There is much in you that is manly, much, I am sure, that is good. I owe you the confession of that much. But the compact cannot be renewed. We stand parted, never to unite. I would not buy my life with the betrayal of a friend."

"Think——" Roberto began to plead.

"What a cowardly thing it would be," she seemed to conclude for him, but with a far different thought.

"If you refuse, it means loss of your estate, degradation, imprisonment, perhaps death," Don Abraham warned.

"Let it be so, then. I do refuse."

"What is this man, this alien who plays citizen for the purpose of introducing the enemy into this country, to you?" Roberto asked, perplexed, baffled, not able to understand. "Let him bear the blame, as he deserves to bear it. Nobody will believe you guilty."

"But I am guilty," she said, proud in the confession. "I have prayed for this war, I have prayed for the day when the United States army would march into this land and——"

"Silence!" Don Abraham commanded in stern, loud voice.

"The cruelties and injustices, the oppression of the strong, the misery of the poor—all this would come to an end, all of it will come to an end, when the United States army marches here!"

"Helena Sprague, as a magistrate of the republic I arrest you on the charge of treason," Don Abraham solemnly declared. "I seize your lands and properties in the name of the republic; I lay hold upon your cattle, your goods, your money, your effects, in the name of the republic. Such as spurn mercy when it is offered, must burn in the fire of justice."

"Take them, then, and my life if the republic wants it!" she said. She turned to Roberto, who stood by torn between loyalty to his country and love for its be-



trayer. "Toberman, is he gone, is he safe?" she asked.

"Toberman is under arrest, safely kept," Don Abraham answered her. "I have sent to the pueblo for the military. Tomorrow Toberman will be shot as a spy."

CHAPTER XI

THE VALOR OF SIMON

HENDERSON had waited all that day in the appointed place for Toberman, who was to bring him news of what he had learned regarding the feasibility of escaping out of that country by the northern road. It was within half an hour of sunset now, and no sign of Toberman.

Although he was well equipped with horse, pistol and clothing which Toberman had supplied him, out of his own resources, the overseer had given him to understand, placing the fugitive under no obligation on that score to the owner of the ranch, Henderson hesitated over making a start toward Monterey. Since coming to the Sprague ranch he had learned more of Abraham Garvanza's power and influence in that part of California. A feudal baron never lived who could stretch a longer arm.

The governor of California, now stationed at Los Angeles, that pueblo having been made the capital lately, was a man under Don Abraham's control. The forty soldiers who garisoned the capital, given the choice between service in this distant land and completing their sentences for various felonies in the prisons at home, were at the beck and call of Don Abraham, the general in command being a relative of the Garvanza family, owing his station to its wide influence.

Toberman had told Henderson, and Helena Sprague had confirmed it, that the news of his escape from Don Abraham's enforced service would have been carried to Monterey by the third day, incredible as it appeared to him. News spread with great rapidity among the Indians and lawless Mexicans who worked on the cattle ranches, and Don Abraham had posted a reward of twenty dollars, gold, for the fugitive's capture and return.

Twenty dollars gold on the California coast in those pastoral days was equal to four head of cattle. A laborer would toil many months to earn that much. A va-

quero did not gain a sum like it in half a year's riding after the herds. It would not be a matter of enmity toward him, Henderson understood, but the plain business one of making a handsome sum of money quickly, that would set the hand of every man, high and low, between Los Angeles and Monterey against his passage.

But there was an obscure way through the mountains, Toberman had told him, long and rough, that might lead to freedom if a trustworthy guide could be found. There seemed to be none in his employ whom he would trust in that capacity. It was on this business that Toberman had engaged to return this day and report.

Henderson watched the valley for his coming from the peak of a hill which seemed a mountain that had sunk into the earth, a feature common to those rugged foothills. There was spread in the broad valley, running up into the inlets of the canyons, a haze of such density that it seemed as if the sea must have swept in to reclaim its ancient domain. This was as blue as the smoke of wood-fires, the Indian summer haze of other lands intensified until it seemed almost palpable; blue as the upper ether of the clearest October skies.

This strange flooding of what seemed smoke from mysterious and hidden fires obscured the view of the valley, where it stood at a level against the walls of the hills as definitely marked as water. Above this level the little mountains stood clear and sharp. Henderson gazed out over this transformation, moved by a strange feeling of friendliness and desire for this land.

An hour ago the sun had fallen brightly upon garish shoulder of scrub-patched hill, upon yellow break of sand in the valley among the green. It had revealed harshly the forbidding features of the country, as daylight strips an aged beauty of her sad pretense. Now a veil had been drawn; the sublimity of the change was such as hurt the heart with longings for the sympathetic vibration that could quiver with it and make it wholly understood.

Henderson gave up his vigil on the hill-top at dusk, returning to his camp. This was a little hut built of boulders from a mountain stream, laid together with mud, a sheep herder's shelter against the winter rains. The place was a sequestered canyon, many miles from the homestead of the ranch, unfrequented by herdsmen at this season. Toberman had assured the fugitive that he might rest in security there until his affairs took a better turn.



This feeling, doubtful at first, had gradually laid its spell over Henderson as the days passed without sight of any human invasion. Toberman had conducted him to the place secretly, at night, by cunning



ways which he believed left no track. Henderson's surprise was the greater, as a consequence of all this caution, to find Simon sitting placidly in the cabin door when he came down from watching the valley for Toberman.

Simon sat with his long knees updrawn, hands idly hooked in front of them, in the patient, immobile fashion such as becomes a habit in people only who have served long in subjugation and waited without hope. The tragedy of his race was in his pose, the watcher who had been set over other men's treasures, none of which he ever was destined to touch or share. But in Simon's case, at least, it was only a racial trait. There was nothing of humility in him, even in the presence of Don Abraham, although of patience for long and unrewarded vigils he must have owned his share.

He rose at Henderson's approach, unfolding his thin length with considerable spryness, advancing with hand extended in demonstration of keen friendship.

"Is it you, my little friend Gabriel?" he hailed, great pleasure in his voice. "I thought you were dead, I thought the wolves had made a dinner on you. Come on, my boy. How are you, how have you passed?"

Henderson's horse was picketed some distance down the canyon; Simon was directly in the way between them. Henderson distrusted the friendly show, although Simon appeared to be unarmed and quite genuine in his expression of pleasure.

Henderson replied to the flood of affectionate inquiry that all was well with him; asked of Simon's family, according to the custom, shook hands with him, accepted a cigarette. He wondered whether Toberman had betrayed him, dismissing the suspicion at once as unworthy.

He could not know, certainly, of the little talk between Don Abraham and Simon the night before, or of the small pieces of gold that had passed from the patron's hand in the dark. He could not have known, indeed, that the old men who sit in the sun, wrapped in introspection, see more than passes by them in the road.

"So, then, all is forgiven, my little Gabriel," Simon hastened to explain, with evidence of great joy in his news. "Don Abraham has sent me, on the directions for finding you that the good John Toberman gave us. I have come with Don Abraham's forgiveness in my hand for the wrong you did the good patron in running away from him. As for the little blow you gave Roberto, there is nobody in thirty miles that does not say bravo to that good deed."

"Toberman told you where to come, did he?"

Henderson questioned that declaration; it set a new current of suspicion and distrust running. Yet, on the other hand, Toberman might have sent Simon, saving himself the time from his activities that the journey would take. It seemed only the natural thing for a man of Toberman's consequence to do. He could not be expected to ride messenger in a matter that had lost its bottom like a barrel in the sun.

It must be that Don Abraham had seen a new light. Perhaps the long-expected news had come from the north that the United States had seized California and added it to its domain. In such case, Don Abraham's forgiveness would find a ready explanation.

"He says to tell you," Simon replied, "that there is no longer any need for you to think of going away to the north, and Don Abraham speaks in the same voice. Don Abraham says he will get you a ticket home in a ship that is in the harbor now, loading hides. It is a Boston ship, with such trees sticking out of it that it made my head swim to look at the tops of them. Yes, I, myself, saw this ship three days ago at the harbor. So you will return?"

"Are you here alone, Simon? There's no treachery in this?"

"As I hope to have two teeth when I am ninety, I am here alone, Gabriel."

"Where is your horse?"

"Down there in the canyon with yours, like a man that has come to dinner with his friend."

"And Don Abraham said he'd let it all pass, the little trouble with Roberto, and everything?"

"Don Abraham said, 'Tell my little son,

Gabriel, that all is forgiven.' He said the ship would sail in three days. We must hurry, Gabriel."

"First, we can't do better than imitate our horses," Henderson said, his confidence growing, suspicion all but dispelled. "Let's get some supper before we start, Simon. I'm hungry; your news is good for the appetite."

Although largely assured by Simon's manner of open honesty, Henderson watched him closely. He had heard the mule driver air his peculiar morals often enough to ground deep and abiding distrust of his ability to do anything exactly straightforward. Simon was apparently unarmed, but Henderson suspected that a pistol was concealed somewhere in his loose clothing, ready to his hand.

"Don Abraham has come to Helena Sprague's ranch, where he is waiting to welcome you and take you to his breast," Simon said, sitting in the light of the little fire after the hastily-prepared supper had been eaten. "We think he has found out something about you, that you are the son of a family, or something grand."

"And Roberto, is he there?"

"Roberto went on to Monterey today, I heard it said. What dark night it is here in the hills!"

"It will be darker before it's lighter.

We'd better go."

"Yes, the ship will not wait, Don Abraham will wonder at our delay. What was that?"

Simon started, listening, hand lifted to impose silence.

"Coyotes, very likely," Henderson replied, unconcerned. "They come around here at night."

"It sounded like a horse." Simon rose, leaning into the dark, listening hard. "If mine has got loose!"

He walked away a little distance, going softly, almost immediately disappearing in the dark, which was deeper for the wooded side of the canyon forming the background of the camp. Henderson heard him swearing presently around the corner of the hut, disturbing the bushes softly as if he sought a passage through.

"A bird in the bushes, I think," Simon said, turning back. "Do you leave your fire uncovered these dry days?"

"I drown it," Henderson said.

"Go ahead, then; we must get down out

of this dark place. Don Abraham will think I'm slower than seven doctors."

Henderson took up the pail to pour what water it contained over the dying fire. He was standing with it poised, held in both hands, when something came toward him from Simon's direction with the swishing sound of a bird's wing. Quick as the leaping of his intuitive warning that treachery was afoot behind him, Henderson stooped and sprang aside.

But Simon, with all the *vaquero's* cunning in casting the lariat, had planned his part too carefully, and risked too much, to fail. The rope fell true to calculation, tightening with Simon's vicious jerk, binding Henderson's arms to his body, one impotent hand within a few inches of his pistol. Simon threw all his sinewy strength into the struggle that followed, cutting Henderson's resistance short by dragging him to the ground. In a moment additional coils of rope webbed the over-trustful sailor as a spider binds a bug.

Nothing was said between the men while this treacherous capture and desperate resistance were going forward. Now, when Simon had his prize securely tied and thrown on the ground, he stirred up the fire, added branches of dry cedar, and blew it to a blaze.

"So I, without a pistol on my body, take this smart Yankee and tie him like a hog," Simon boasted, great and arrogant satisfaction in his voice. He lifted his arms to display his body free of a belted pistol, and sat down near the fire, his back against a small tree.

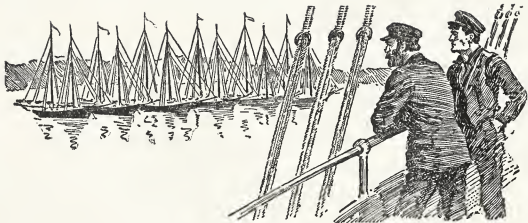
"I'll remember this treachery, Simon, in the day that will come," Henderson said.

"The day that is coming for you is one when Roberto will cut you to pieces with his whip," Simon sneered. "Well, there is no hurry now. We will wait till daylight comes, then ride down the canyon. It would be foolish to arrive at midnight, for Don Abraham would be asleep."

Simon smoked a while, legs stretched toward the fire, blowing smoke luxuriously, chin lifted high.

"What did I say to them when I left my pistol behind, all the foolish ones looking at me like men whose jaws were out of joint? I said, 'I need no pistol for this work. I am going to catch a Yankee, and that is not the same as a man.' When they see me come back with you, tied like a pig for sale in the plaza! seven doctors, what a laugh!"





THE PACKET ADMIRAL

By WARREN ELLIOT CARLETON

Author of "The Final Test," "The Harpoon Heritage," etc.

THE TRADITION OF THE SEA DIES HARD AMONG THE YANKEE SKIPPERS
OF THE OLD SCHOOL—AND THE TRADITION IS FAITHFULLY LIVED UP TO

JUMPIN' Jehossyfah! I didn't know there was that many!"

Captain Ed Pierce preened his bushy gray mustache, his brown eyes staring at the six two-masted schooners comprising the Crosby fleet. Beside him, on the deck of the Boston and Howesport packet schooner, *Bessie Barker*, Captain Bert Blackmer also studied them. The Crosby fleet was lying at anchor in the "cowyard," the sheltered outer harbor of the decadent Cape Cod fishing town of Howesport.

"Looks like they mean business, don't it?" Captain Ed commented. "Bert, seems like perhaps you'd be wise to sell out while the sellin' good."

Captain Bert bit his lip. There was good sense in what Captain Ed had suggested. Captain Ed was shrewd. His investments had brought him opulence, made him Howesport's wealthiest citizen. Yes, Captain Ed's opinion was always worth weighing.

Captain Bert's tall, erect, thin yet sinewy frame, legs thrust wide apart, would have graced the quarterdeck of a finer craft than even the trim *Bessie Barker*. For twenty years he had successfully carried on the shipping business between Howesport and Boston. It was hard for him to give up now. His black hair and short beard, draping bold aquiline features, were turn-

ing gray. The old muscular strength of the days when he was in the South American trade had diminished with his increasing years, which had now piled up to sixty-four.

When he had discarded the *Mary Chilton* and bought the *Bessie Barker* two years ago, he had thought, "She'll last a life-time. A few years more of service, and then—life ashore. Perhaps owner of a fleet of packets—"

He had never thought of such a thing as competition. People had laughed at him when he started the packet business twenty years ago. Howesport had the railroad. At best, it was a dead port.

"He'll never make it pay," they had said, and in derision had dubbed him "the Packet Admiral."

Yet he had made it pay. It hadn't made him rich like Captain Ed, but give him a few years' lease of life and with business growing as it had lately, and— Well, he would be an admiral, of a line of packets plying between various ports and bringing him a small fortune, perhaps even wealth. That was all he asked—a few more years like the last five. But now—the Crosby Company.

"They've sold stock in town, too," said Captain Bert. "Mis' Mehitable Barnes fired a broadside into my hull this afternoon by informin' me that she'd bought twenty shares of it."

"Lord sakes—that so? I didn't know she was that well-to-do."

"She ain't. Took about her last cent. Seems she knows Crosby—he used to come here summers—and he coaxed her into it. Misrepresented things to her, too. Didn't tell her they intend to operate a packet business against me and cut my throat, in addition to their regular coastwise shippin'. No; Crosby outlined it to her wholly as a fleet of coastwise schooners."

"I vum!"

"Mehitable usually tells me all her business. But she sorter kept this a secret from everybody. You know women do that—once in a while."

"Folks here have said you've been kinder courtin' her late years. Funny she ain't let the cat out o' the bag 'fore this."

"Oh—just intimate friends, that's all." Captain Bert cleared his throat. "Still, for her it may be a good investment. But cripes! The air was sizzlin' when I told her Crosby's goin' to put a packet on 'tween here and Boston to compete with me!" he chuckled.

"Didn't like it, eh?"

"She vowed she'd git rid of them shares and give Crosby a piece of her mind to boot. But I told her to hang on to 'em, that it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, and she sorter calmed down. But I left her nigh cryin'."

A stalwart fellow jumped aboard from the wharf.

"Well, nigh supper time. Guess I'll be goin'," said Captain Ed, stepping on the rail and hoisting himself on to Robbins Wharf. "Looks like you're competin' against an awful stack of capital, Bert. But keep up your courage if you do fight it out. What you told the widder 'bout that ill wind might apply to you, too."

Whistling, Captain Ed walked down the wharf.

"The *Mary Chilton's* all ready, Cap'n,"



spoke the big newcomer in a deep voice. He pointed over his shoulder at the old schooner, unused and falling to pieces on the other side of Robbins Wharf. "Everything's

ready, sir," he repeated while Captain Bert hesitated before answering.

"All right, Bill."

Bill Hyde's speech and appearance—bull-

dog jaw, swarthy face and curly black hair sticking out from a shabby blue yachting cap—branded him a Yankee, but foreign to the Cape. Captain Bert had hired him two weeks ago at a Boston agency, after a long list of drunkards, thieves, and even one murderer who had sailed with him as his sole companion, first on the old *Mary Chilton*, and subsequently on the *Bessie Barker*. The captain liked Bill. He was frank, decisive, still exuberant with youth, and an all-round good shipmate. And the customer Bill had found him in Gloucester for the decrepit *Mary Chilton*—

"We'll clear for Gloucester in the *Mary Chilton* right away," said the captain, "and come back on the mornin' train so's we can take the *Bessie* to Boston tomorrow afternoon. You're sure, Bill, this customer you've got me ain't goin' to be disappointed in his bargain?"

"Disappointed? 'Course not. He isn't buying a yacht. Old hulks are what he always buys for hauling stone. He'll have her hull fixed up and she'll do well enough for a barge."

Across the harbor over the Herring-bone, a sandy strip of land running parallel to the Howesport waterfront and sheltering the outer harbor, the sun had set, only the rim of its globe now peering above the horizon. The decaying old fish piers on both sides of Robbins Wharf loomed hoary, deserted and sinister, ghosts of palmier days. Not a sound broke the silence save the squawk of a passing gull and the wash of the sea on the sides of the schooner.

Captain Blackmer still stood with a Napoleonic pose, looking out toward the vanishing sun.

"If 'twa'n't for the Widder Barnes," he remarked when its last radiance had faded and night shrouded the after-glow, "I'd be tempted to sail out and scuttle that whole Crosby fleet."

"And why stop because of the Widow Barnes?" asked Bill, suddenly interested. "I'm game to do it. I don't want to see you done out of business by that Crosby outfit. Jobs are scarce, and I'm quite satisfied with this one. Will you give me leave to dispose of those schooners for you?"

"Why, of course not! I just—was thinkin'—how anybody *might* do it—that's all."

"It would be easy as—"

"Let's drop the subject. Come on aboard the *Mary*, Bill."

But the thought of striking underhand-

edly at the Crosby fleet was planted in Captain Bert's brain. The schooners had all been towed to Howesport from the shipyards by tugboats. It was doubtful whether their crews were yet organized; probably only a few men kept watch on the vessels while they lay in the Cowyard waiting for the Crosby Company to begin shipping operations.

"I've knocked around the water long enough to know that a new company like this Crosby outfit has fired all its ammunition in its opening shot," insisted Bill, while they prepared the *Mary Chilton* for clearing Robbins Wharf. "Who ever heard of a new company in coastwise shipping starting out bang with six vessels? Two would be a plenty, for an opener. And they're all brand new two-masters, too. Must have cost a bunch of money. Cap'n, if we dispose of those schooners somehow, the Crosby Company is dead."

Captain Bert was silent a moment. It did seem logical. But the widow—she was so tormented scrupulous. Being honest, doing nobody wrong—that was about all he heard when he took frequent suppers and Sunday dinners with her. He had even dreamed that some day, if the packet business held good, he would make those meals permanent fixtures in his life by marrying the widow.

"Those old barrels in the hold—they're some the *Mary's* owner-to-be asked me to fetch him," continued Bill. "There's a lot of dunnage in there with them. Lord, the *Mary's* a regular floating junk shop!"

"She always was," drily commented the captain. "Leaks, rolls, and the deck is so rotten in places you'd go through if you stepped out a hornpipe. Any man who can sell her ought to be Secretary of the Navy."

It was nine o'clock when the *Mary Chilton* cast off and headed under full sail down the harbor toward Cape Cod Bay. There was no moon, and a thin fog blew over the water in a fair June breeze. Captain Blackmer stood aft at the wheel. Bill was puttering around, first in the foc'sle, then in the hold.

The southwesterly breeze began to pick up off-shore. Dead ahead in the fog veil loomed the six schooners. Salt water politics! Captain Bert recollected that he had played them before. There was the time, when he was an A. B., that the old bark *Shannon Magee* rammed the Dutch brig off the Brazilian coast, and he and the rest of the crew looted her cargo. He had never told Widow Barnes about that.

Then, too, there were other things he had never told her—but what she didn't know wouldn't harm her.



Bill came up from the hold. He peered off through the fog toward the Crosby fleet.

"Lordy!" he exclaimed, coming aft toward the captain. "If we'd moored them ourselves we couldn't have placed them better for disposing of 'em. Look at 'em! Less than eight fathoms between 'em. Now ain't that just like a fool tugboat skipper and a company of greenhorns!"

Captain Bert bit his lip. Was he a coward? He—guided by the silly sentiments of a woman, a woman who had never gone to sea, who didn't own a packet that was to be run out of business; a woman who had bought shares in that damned Crosby fleet.

Bill had gone back to the hold. The captain hated to think of having to give up the packet and of losing his genial new shipmate. He recalled the former mates whom he had shipped on his two schooners. He thought of how this new one had taken hold, his ability as a navigator, his reliability as a companion. Bill had suggested striking at the Crosby fleet largely to safeguard his own job. But in so doing also to stabilize the captain's packet business. And if the widow were deprived of the money she had invested in the Crosby Company, it would make her all the more willing to be his wife—when he was ready to ask her.

Out of the hold wriggled a little braid of smoke. A small cloud puffed from the open hatch, followed by a dense black column that might have streamed from the funnel of an ocean liner. Bill emerged, coughing, and the crackling of burning wood sounded from below.

"God almighty!" shouted the captain, "What have you done?"

"The small boat's close to the companion," replied Bill calmly, designating the dinghy aft. "Head for the Crosby fleet—the nearest schooner."

"You damned traitor!" snarled the captain, starting forward. Bill blocked his way.

"I'm doing this—for you," he declared. "Those empty tar barrels in the hold—the

Mary's doomed. So is the Crosby fleet. It's self-preservation for you, sir. Such things have happened accidentally before. Nobody will ever suspect that this didn't. Get out the way; give me the wheel!"

Captain Bert felt himself shoved aside by a quick-moving giant who dashed to the wheel and swung it—then the lurch of the schooner—the creaking of the boom. Flames from the hold licked out of the hatch, and smoke poured to leeward toward the fleet.

"—the wind's right—their position's right. They're fresh with paint and varnish. Good-by, old Crosby fleet!" sang the fiend at the wheel.

Captain Bert was upon him. He had been a skilled fighter in his day. He struck out with his left fist at Bill's grinning face. But the mate stepped nimbly aside, ducked, and letting go the wheel, floored the captain with an uppercut to the chin.

"No time for fooling!" Bill roared. "Stay there, and do what I tell you. I'm in command until we've seen this thing through."

The ancient *Mary Chilton* was a floating tinder box above her waterline. So rapidly did the flames catch on to the decks and bulkheads, it was doubtful whether a man could stay at the wheel long enough to bear down on the first schooner of the down-wind fleet.

"She's a floating hell!" bellowed Bill above the crackle and roar of the fire. "Get on your feet, old man! I need you. This is no one-man job."

Captain Bert, still groggy, his mind clouded by the blow Bill had given him, crawled to his feet. The smoke stifled him. Yes; Bill was right—it was not a one-man job. It wasn't a job for any man. Bill's eyes ran tears. Black smoke rolling out of the companionway shrouded him.

"Here—the wheel—take it!" Bill choked. Captain Bert grasped its spokes and held it steady, holding his breath in the dense smoke as long as he could, then stepping aside to clearer air, exhaling quickly and breathing again.

The wind, as if a partner in Bill's scheme, moved the smoke off the port quarter. Dimly, but looming more distinctly, the captain discerned the first schooner ahead. By standing at the starboard side of the wheel, Bill and he could keep their eyes on the fleet.

"Look!" Captain Blackmer's eyes were focused on the bow of the first schooner.

There stood a man waving his arms. Another form in oilskins stood near him.

"They're all safe," encouraged Bill. "We're getting away with it fine. Fire—the wind took us—we lost control. Hold her steady! See—they've got a dinghy in the water—" pointing at the small boat floating beside the big schooner.

"But—but look! Look at that name on her bow! Read it!"

The bow of the schooner ahead was aglow with the red light from the *Mary Chilton*.

"*Mehitable Barnes*," read Bill aloud. "You damned old fool, give me the wheel!"

Captain Bert swung the wheel and held on, even after Bill had pounced on him,



bearing him to the deck under his greater strength. Like rivets the captain's fingers clung, Bill clawing at them, tearing at them, to wrench them from their hold.

Fire tore through the rigging. The blazing craft heeled to starboard, flames shriveling sails and snapping stays and halyards. Over the heads of the two men struggling at the wheel the crimson curtain spread, swept by the rush of the wind at the quick veering movement of the vessel.

It was sheets of flame and not canvas that carried the schooner on her course out of the shadow of the *Mehitable Barnes*. Men shouted on the *Mehitable's* bow as the *Mary Chilton* floundered past. Blistering heat bore down from the blazing mainsail upon the contestants for the wheel, surged up from below, like the ends of fiendish tongs, gripping the two between.

But Captain Bert did not hear the curses of his mate; did not even wince at Bill's nails clawing at his hands that grasped the wheel. All he felt—all he was conscious of—was the swirl of water from the sides of the ungainly *Mary Chilton* mingled with the crackle and roar from below and overhead—her sluggish departure from the Crosby fleet lying increasingly but slowly astern. And somewhere in the distance that dim gray shore-line of the Herringbone showed faintly through illuminated fog and smoke—it seemed miles and miles away. Then the mainsail descended in a streamer of fire, and the oppressive weight of Bill rolled off his back.

The form of a man groveled at his feet. Captain Bert pulled himself up by the wheel.

"Bill!" he raved. "Bill—you damned scoundrel! I've beaten you! *Beaten you!* Look astern. Not a schooner of 'em even scorched. Come, Bill—your trick at the wheel now. But you can't turn back. Our canvas is all burnt away. What's left won't hold a paper-bagful of wind."

The captain's face smarted as with the stings of a thousand bees. His eyes—were they burned out? He couldn't really see now. He rather felt the presence of the crumpled mate, roasting on the gridiron of a quarterdeck. Into his arms he gathered the limp body, ran with it, he knew not where. His feet tangled in a line. He fell—and water closed over his head.

Yet was it water? The fire itself had not been so hot. He had scarcely felt the heat of the schooner's blazing wood and mainsail that had encompassed him—but this! It was boiling pitch, scalding him to the marrow. But he clung to the man in his arms, and they bobbed up to the surface together, the captain gasping for breath in the open air.

He knew it was salt water—cold salt water—that scalded his hot flesh. The man he clung to must be dead. It would do him no good even if the captain swam with him to the distant Herringbone. Was it worth while to drag a dead body with him, a body that would hinder his own chances of saving himself? Yes, he must do it. Bill was a scoundrel, but there might be a spark of life in him yet. Even a scoundrel—any human being—was worth saving. It was the law of the sea.

The line binding his leg, he kicked to disengage it. A dark shadow moved in the red light of the water. It was the boat, the dinghy which Bill had left near the companion for their getaway. Clinging to Bill with one hand, he hauled at the line with the other. Finding that he made no progress, he fastened his teeth into Bill's charred shirt and hauled on the line hand over hand. As he suspected, it was fast to the dinghy.

Over the gunwale of the small boat he threw one arm, supporting Bill with the other. To leeward, safely out of the Cowyard, drifted the glowing fragment of the *Mary Chilton's* hull. But the other light—it was brighter. It illumined the entire wide harbor like day, from the Herringbone to the Howesport waterfront. A yellow light, almost like a big lamp.

The captain's heart sank. He clung grimly to the boat and the limp body, and turned his head toward the Crosby fleet. The *Mehitable Barnes* was a sheet of leaping, crackling fire from stem to stern!

The captain stared, fascinated. And even while he watched, the flames jumped to the next schooner. The wind caught the fire and swept it in a sheet of gold the length and breadth of the fleet. One after the other, four of the schooners burst into flames. The fifth and sixth, in the path of the cyclone of swirling fire, were already smoking like smoldering logs.

But he—he had a bigger proposition on his hands now than watching a fleet burn up. The inert form he supported wriggled slightly—its mouth breathed, feebly spat out water. If it weren't for Bill he could crawl over the gunwale into the dinghy, run ashore to the Herringbone—but what then? Nothing but the memory of the disaster he had caused by first putting such an idea in Bill's head. He could never look *Mehitable* in the eyes again. His rivalry with the Crosby Company, the mysterious sailing of the *Mary Chilton* at night—who would believe his story of Bill's treachery? He could end it all by letting go of the dinghy and sinking—with Bill. Yet Bill was alive. The law of the sea—

But why should he rescue Bill? Bill had deliberately planned and executed the whole disaster; planned it even before the captain had mentioned scuttling the fleet, evidenced by the tar barrels. Why should the *Mary Chilton's* buyer, a stone carrier, want tar barrels? The captain had done his best to avoid the *Mehitable*—fought for it, almost died for it. It was Bill's doing, the whole outrageous business.

Yet Bill had done it for him. Wrong, to be sure, but still out of a sort of devotion—such devotion as a savage might



show to his chief. A fellow who would do that for his skipper was worth saving. Captain Bert gripped the gunwale and Bill with an iron clutch and let the waves and wind do the rest.

He knew that he must be badly burned; that Bill's burns must be even worse. Bill had been buried in the burning mainsail when it fell. Bill had caught it all on his

back, thus shielding the captain while they struggled.

There were boats headed from Howesport village to the burning fleet. On the Herringbone the captain made out lights moving back and forth. He wondered whether the men he had glimpsed on the schooner were safe. No doubt the lights on the Herringbone were those men hauling up their boats.

If he could only get Bill into his own boat, get into it himself. It would be so much easier. The strain of holding up a man and clinging to the gunwale at the same time, with that scalding water tingling through every pore of his tender body—it was telling on him. But the Herringbone looked nearer, its illumined shoreline showing white less than a mile away.

A mile! One mile or one hundred miles, Captain Bert knew that his strength was unequal to his task. The man held up by his arm locked with the captain's moaned, and his puffed eyes opened, narrow slits encased in swollen, sooty flesh.

"You—you—I thought—" he gasped. "The Crosby fleet—"

"Never mind them," said the captain tenderly. "We've got a mile to go yet. Take it easy."

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"The *Mary Chilton*?"

"Oh—her!" disgustedly. "She's all right. So are the Crosby vessels."

"You lie! They're burned—every one of them!" He turned his head with a great effort and looked toward the paling flare of what had been the Crosby fleet.

But Captain Bert was interested in the gray sloop bearing down on them. He needed his strength, even that which he would spend in the effort of speaking.

"Bill," he nevertheless exclaimed, "can't you—grab the gun'le—yourself? My arm—it's about gone. My back—"

Bill groaned and stiffly raised one arm from the water, but it fell back heavily. Captain Bert gritted his teeth and his fingers tightened on the gunwale until it seemed that they must gouge into the wood.

That was what had tired him—holding on to the gunwale. It wasn't Bill's dead weight that exhausted him. It was the resistance of the jerking little boat upon which their lives depended. Either the light of the burning schooners was dimming fast, or the fog was thickening. The water rippling in the glow grew hazy. It

was as if they were rising, he and Bill—rising into a cloud. Dizziness—nausea—scalding water, torturing salt water like acid—the onrushing gray sloop expanding to gigantic proportions like an inflating balloon—voices. . . . He couldn't stand it. His fingers fell from the gunwale, and water closed soothingly over his head.

THE fog lifted . . . two men were talking. Captain Bert looked into the sharp, pale features of a stranger with a small black mustache. The stranger was bending over him, daubing his chest and arms with grease. The wood the captain was lying on was the quarter-deck of Captain Ed Pierce's sloop, and Captain Ed stood nearby at the wheel.

Captain Bert felt cool. He smelt camphor. And the gladdening thought that he was not seriously burned was checked by the sight of a heap of canvas lying at his side.

"Bill!" he spoke in a far-away voice. "Where's Bill?"

But he knew well enough that the canvas hid what had been Bill.

"But why torment him? Cap'n Bert never done it," declared Captain Ed. "I've known him since we was boys—"

The stranger checked him, and addressing Captain Bert, asked, "Why did you burn the Crosby fleet?" The abruptness of the question brought Captain Bert to his senses.

"I ain't so sure I did," he replied.

"But your schooner was afire. It ran into them—"

"That's a lie!" insisted Captain Bert. "If my schooner had rammed one of the fleet, how come it she fetched up to the east'ard of the Cowyard? A burnin' schooner that rams a vessel ain't likely to recover herself and make a half-turn against the wind."

"By gum, that's right!" agreed Captain Ed. "I told ye Bert never done it—"

"And the light—did ye notice?" Captain Bert went on. "Twas yellow and the *Mary's* was red. The *Mehitable* never caught fire from the *Mary*. She was set afire from the inside. Part of that yellow light was kerosene."

The stranger looked at Captain Ed and smiled.

"I admit the idea of scuttlin' the fleet come to me," Captain Bert went on, "but I never sanctioned Bill to set the *Mary* afire. He done it without my knowin'. Said he'd got a customer for the old hulk

in Gloucester—got me to sail there with her tonight.”

“A fake trip,” put in Captain Ed. The stranger held up a hand to restrain him.

“I fought for the wheel when he set the



Mary afire—and I got it. I sheered the *Mary* off from the fleet, and 'twas while Bill and me fought for the wheel that the mains'l fell blazin' on Bill—and I done my best to save him—”

“It was that burn on his back that killed Bill,” Captain Ed explained. “Mr. Clyde, a friend of Cap'n Bert's, I forbid ye to tantalize him any longer.”

“I'm accepting your orders,” smiled the stranger. “Cap'n Blackmer, don't think we're blind to what you did. We were trailing the *Mary Chilton* in the fog. We saw everything that happened.”

“You trailed us!”

“We've suspected it all along. The Crosby Company had sunk too much money in its fleet.”

“That's what Bill told me.” Captain Bert's eyes were wide.

“The Crosby Company was left bankrupt with a fleet it could not get rid of, although they succeeded in keeping the news from getting out. It had no capital to operate such a fleet with, but the vessels were insured up to the last dollar of their value.”

“Tell him about Bill,” interposed Captain Ed.

“Wait.” And to Captain Bert again, “The Brisfield Insurance Company sent me as its inspector to keep the fleet under observation while it was in this harbor. Cap'n Pierce is a stockholder in the insurance company. So as soon as I got here—about an hour or so ago on the night train from Boston—I looked him up.”

“I'd be in considerable money if ye'd come an hour or so sooner,” commented Captain Ed. “But go on.”

“Cap'n Ed said you were starting for Gloucester in an old hulk you'd discarded—with a new mate—and we agreed it looked suspicious. So we trailed you in his sloop.”

Captain Bert sat bolt upright.

“We stayed to wind'ard of the Crosby fleet to make observations,” Mr. Clyde

went on. “That's why we didn't pick you up earlier. The last we saw of you and Bill, you were fighting for the wheel with fire all around you. We had to get complete evidence that the Crosby fleet was set afire from the inside of the *Mehitable*.”

“Tell him about—” insisted Captain Ed.

“Oh yes—Bill.” The stranger paused and glanced at the form shrouded with canvas. “Well, Bill was Crosby's professional crook who did all his dirty work for him. You see, Crosby has done this sort of thing before—got up companies, failed, and usually ended by collecting full insurance after his establishment had burned up. This is his first marine venture. All his others were in business ashore. But we got inside information on his past record—and Bill's—that opened our eyes.”

“Then Bill was workin' for him—and against me—all the time?”

“Using you for the goat, to lay the burning of the fleet on to you,” said Mr. Clyde. “Bill got his just reward tonight.”

“And how about the insurance?” Captain Bert's voice was husky.

“Not a cent will be paid. We saw the *Mehitable* set on fire from her foc'sle when the *Mary* sheered off from her. We saw the escape of the men who did it. Our next step will be to get the goods on Crosby himself.”

“But the Widder Barnes—all her money is tied up in the Crosby Company,” protested Captain Bert.

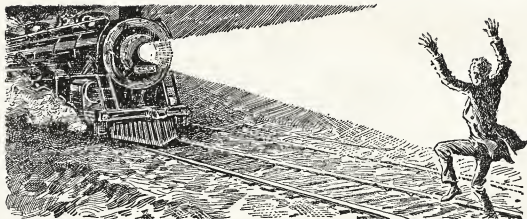
“Don't worry about her,” exploded Captain Ed. “It's me who's stung—not her. I bought all her shares in the Crosby Company after I left you this afternoon.”

“Godfrey!”

“Serves me right, too, for judgin' the strength of that Crosby Company by the show their fleet made in the harbor. That ill wind of yourn sorter shifted, Bert, and left me becalmed.”

“But you, Bert,” he added with determination, “you pop the question to the widder as soon as your feet hit dry land. Say, she'd 'a' given me that Crosby stock free gratis if I hadn't had a two-thousand-dollar check all made out to her in my hand. With her luck and your judgment, you'll form a team that will make you a packet admiral yet!”





HENRY HORNBONE'S ONE-MAN WAR

By HELEN TOPPING MILLER

Author of "White Collar Stuff," "Pitch," etc.

PREJUDICES OF THE OLD-TIMERS DIE HARD. BUT A RAILROAD IS A POWERFUL THING FOR ONE OLD-TIMER TO FIGHT—AND WHEN OTHERS ENTER THE FEUD, THINGS BEGIN TO LOOK DIFFERENT

IN HIS sooty kitchen with the coal oil lamp sending a plume of smoke aloft and four kittens rolling under the three-legged stove, Henry Hornbone sat and went through the motions of a man eating his supper.

He fished sausages out of a skillet, he cut them carefully into small bits, he smeared oleomargarine on thick slabs of baker's bread and he stirred sugar into his tea, one spoonful after another, but he did not eat.

Henry was listening. His ears were listening, straining till he could almost see them standing out batlike from his knobby old head. His whole gaunt ridiculous body was listening, and his soul, such cramped and curious sort of soul as he owned, stood stock still in a cold tremor of mingled triumph and dread.

Henry was listening for the wreck of the Oriole Limited.

While he spooned sugar into his cup, staring off into the blackness with a sort of fascinated paralysis, he was waiting for the hideous crashing, the roar and rending, the sickening upheaval, the booming rush of steam when the proud steel train should go hurtling into the frozen muck of his turnip patch. Inch by inch past block

after block, he followed the Oriole Limited in his mind through the black night to her doom. Now she would be streaking through Hodges Siding; a great whooping serpent with a thousand gleaming eyes and a tongue of flame.

He took out his old silver watch, calculated the difference between sun time and railroad time—speculated. Four minutes out of Hodges now—eight minutes more. Eight minutes, and he would be even with the B. & A.!

Nothing on earth could save the Oriole Limited. Henry had fixed everything himself. He had turned the abandoned old switch that in the past had served the guano factory and spiked it himself. To be certain that nothing could prevent the destruction he planned he had put two heavy plow beams on the rails near the switch frogs and had weighted them down with rocks and brickbats. All this after dark and so near to train time that there was small chance for a prowling section hand to discover his work.

It had taken Henry eighteen years to accumulate courage enough to spike that switch. Half his queer, isolated life had been devoted to a lonely vendetta against the B. & A.—a one-man war which no one

beside himself suspected. "Sixteen years since, when the spur to the guano plant was first laid, Henry had made a wedge of steel, long and sharp. Twelve years later, when the factory had yielded its malodorous ghost and its red tin roof began to sag and the old spur track to rust, he had begun a long series of abortive and secret attempts at train wrecking.

Every dark and rainy night for years he had crept out through his pie-plant row and past his humming beehives, slipped over the white fence and spiked the switch



open with a few quick, practised strokes. But always about the time the Oriole Limited pulled out of Hodges Siding his courage had failed him, and he had rushed out with mallet and sledge to remove the menace he had created.

Whenever a work train pulled into Elsie, Henry always suffered a cold apprehension for fear the useless old spur would be torn up before he had screwed up enough nerve to do his work of sabotage. But for some reason the grass-grown length of abandoned spur remained. And now the switch was open, grimly spiked, waiting for the arrogant engine of the Limited to come crashing, amazed, to her tragedy.

Six minutes!

Henry tasted his tea. It was syrupy and nauseous. He spat it out nervously, turned his eyes toward the black window and wrested them away again by main force. He had purposely locked the door and hidden the key in a sack of nails and bolts where it would take half an hour to find it. The front door was locked fast also; indeed the front door had been locked fast for so many years that it was doubtful if the rusty old lock would turn at all.

He had taken off his shoes, carried them deliberately to the attic and hung them over the rafters. Every precaution against a last-minute sagging of his nerve had been taken. He had even dropped the sledge hammer in the cistern, half to guard against his own weakness and half as alibi. The wreck, he had decided, would be laid to train robbers who had been operating on the B. & A. at frequent intervals. Nobody would suspect old Henry Hornbone who fathered every deserted cat for miles around and sat always on the front

seat at prayer meeting with his useless ear trumpet slung around his shoulder on a buckskin cord; because nobody ever had suspected him though he had carried on his one-man war against the road for eighteen years.

No one, not even the B. & A. officials themselves, were aware that a state of hostilities had existed between Henry and the road since the first surveyors had come dragging their numbered stakes through his little peach orchard. A few engineers had laughed when they saw the absurd old fellow in his flapping clothes standing beside the new roadbed brandishing angry fists. But when, not long since, a trio of gondolas had broken loose from a slow-crawling freight and gone bumping joyfully down to the station where they crashed through fifty feet of platform, demolished a dozen telegraph poles and a water crane, nobody so much as thought of old Henry. Henry's very appearance was an alibi. He looked like a motherless child, grown to man's stature, grizzled, bewildered, eagerly friendly.

Since his boyhood Henry had been stone deaf. Such fragments of speech as remained to him, made timorous by the vast closing in of silence, were uttered in a shrill yell which the unthinking and strangers assumed to be the babbling of a miron. The amused pity with which his attempts at conversation were received had not escaped Henry's sharp eyes, and he had grown to depend more and more upon his grin as a means of communication with the world, and upon a jerky code of signs and syllables.

No one would have believed that grisly plots were hatched behind the glow of that ingenuous grin. No one in Elsie, he knew, would ever suspect that the sharpened wedge and the plow beams were the work of a simple, grinning old mute. He was safe enough if he could just sit still.

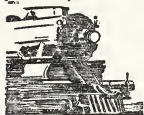
Four minutes!

In four minutes he would be revenged for the invading of his little plot of ground, which his mother had left to him, by men who had cursed him and by steel rails and yelping engines. In four minutes he would have been paid for the dazed wretchedness which had been his when men with law at their backs had come and gabbled things which he could neither hear nor comprehend, but which, it appeared, gave to the B. & A. the little earth he had tended, gave them the right to shower his roof with hot cinders, to slay his quince bushes with sulphurous smoke, to rattle

his puttyless window panes loose with the thunder of locomotives.

Four minutes! He held his elbows in a grip that hurt. He twisted his old legs about each other till they ached. His face, with its three-day growth of sandy beard, writhed and twitched. But he sat still.

Coming! Coming! He felt the first premonitory shudder of his floor sills that



told him the train had crossed the bridge below the yards. Every pulse in him spun as though a gigantic current galvanized him. His head roared.

His chest hurt.

Nearer! Almost here! His grip held. His body grew numb.

Then something snapped. Some grim gripping gave way. He went limp. He retched. He was old Henry Hornbone again, simple, kindly old Henry who mothered cats.

He went through the window kicking the sash to flinders. Shoeless he leaped like a wild old warlock through his garden, over the fence, up to the right of way. The headlight of the Oriole Limited flared upon him—a dancing ghost with waving arms—as the train came to a grinding stop thirty feet from the spiked switch and the plow beams.

Charlie Sanders, who ran the Limited, sprang out of the cab. Newt Murphy, the conductor, sprinted down the cinders. To them old Henry waved wild hands and cackled unintelligible things. The flagman, an officious person, thudded ahead and discovered the open switch.

"By George, old Henry sure saved all our lives," Charlie Sanders explained to the passengers who came swarming up. "Looka that—the way we was running old Fifteen-eighty would have turned plumb end over end when she hit that spur."

Henry Hornbone found himself the center of a crowd, and a hero. Men shook his hand, women's cold, shaking fingers clasped his own. They shouted questions at him till Newt Murphy came to his relief.

"He's deaf—can't hear a thing, Henry can't. Harmless old guy, but stone deaf."

Someone was moving through the crowd gathering up money, a girl with red hair and a little gray hat tipped over one eye. She brought the donation to Henry in her cupped hands—little hands—bills and sil-

ver dollars and a few quarters and halves.

"Take it," she urged, "it's for you."

Henry backed away. All his life he had been terrified in the presence of women.

"He can't hear you, lady," explained Charlie Sanders.

"Oh—make him understand, somebody."

The girl followed Henry with her double handful of currency, but he backed further, sidling, his lips lifted at the corners.

He was in a cold agony, a wretchedness of shaking relief and anguish of conscience. He wanted to be let alone. He wanted to creep into his old bed under the wool quilts, deep down where he could shut his ears against the penetrating jeers that clanged like sleighbells in his brain. The girl's insistence drew from him a painful burst of his rare, dreadful speech.

"I don't want any money!" he shrilled.

Then, snatching away from them, he leaped the fence and tore through his tiny back garden. Inside his house he jerked the blinds shut over the outraged window and sagged down in a chair, shaking from head to foot.

"Now," he thought gloomily, "now—they'll tear up that spur. Now what you goin' to do, Henry Hornbone? You're a dad-blamed old fool."

But something seemed to warm him as he crept half-clothed into his bed.

"Gosh, that girl had little hands," he thought aloud. "Might 'a' killed her anyway. Might 'a' killed a lot of folks. Didn't kill 'em though. Didn't kill anybody."

The visitor who banged on Henry's old warped front door in the morning grew weary after a while and went around to the back. The knock on the back door meant nothing to Henry's sealed ears, but the jar came presently to his senses and he opened the closed shutters and thrust out his head. The grin was absent from his grizzled face. He glowered. He scowled till he saw that the intruder upon his doorstep was feminine and young, that she had red hair and little hands and feet that looked as though dancing were their chief mission in life. Then he grinned.

"Key's lost," he yelled suddenly, so that the girl jumped. "Can't git in."

She nodded and smiled. The smile and her dancing eyes and the glow of her hair were a combination as dazzling as winter sunshine. She had manifestly come pre-



pared. She pulled a little pad and pencil from her pocket and wrote rapidly.

"Can you read?"

The furious disgust in Henry's eyes was answer enough. She thought him a plumb fool then!

"Sure, I can read," he shouted. "I ain't crazy. I'm just hard of hearing."

Eager apology was in her smile. She scribbled rapidly.

"You are a brave man," Henry read. "You saved the lives of eighty-four people."

He shook his head. "I ain't brave. I'm just an old fool."

She laughed at this, and it was as if the sun leaped up with a shout and a lot of nymphs and dryads and other ladies in diaphanous veils whirled in a mad dance on a hilltop.

"I am the new operator at Elsie," ran her next missive. "I have a pass for you from the president of the road. You can ride anywhere you want any time you like."

"Don't want to ride," grumbled Henry. "Don't want to go no place. Don't want nothing to do with your railroad—no time."

He remembered then that he had neglected to put on his outer shirt and that his red flannel undergarment was informal even for morning wear. So he pulled in his head like a sulky old turtle.

"Don't want nothing to do with your railroad," he repeated. "Never. No time!"

He clapped the shutters fast and locked them with a wooden pin. Presently he felt the pattering passage of her heels on the porch. She was going off and leaving him alone. Let 'em all go off and leave him alone.

He dressed slowly, climbing to the cold attic for his shoes. From the mail sack he rummaged the key and opened the back door. As it swung back, shrieking, a dozen vari-colored cats suddenly appeared from different places of waicing and streaked eagerly into the house. Henry clumped back, sopped bread in the sausage grease, congealed from the night before, soaked it in sweetened tea and set out half a dozen plates which instantly became the centers for a petal-like array of flashing pink tongues.

Then he trudged through the brief strip of garden left to him, tossed a handful of corn to a charging troup of guineas, and arrived at the fence. Down the track he could see a line of blue-clad laborers. The

lift of their sledges and their flashing fall came to him soundlessly. They were tearing up the old spur.

He swung a leg over the fence and tramped on to the village, nodding to people whom he met. Women smiled at him, men gave him friendly nods. He was a personage. He had saved the Limited from a wreck. Something which survived in Henry's queer, cramped old soul laughed aloud. He was safe. Nobody in Elsie would suspect him. His war could go on. But now he would have to think of something new—now that they were tearing up



the spur. He felt lost and empty. For eighteen years he had comforted the thwarted vindictiveness in him with plans for that colossal wreck. Now it was all ended. Days of toil which had gone into the sharpening of that wedge were wasted. Nobody had been killed though. That was something. He had never thought much about the people being killed. He was glad that there were no awful bloody bodies lying around in Elsie. Henry hated blood. He kept his chickens till they died of old age because he could not slay them.

At the station he surveyed the new length of platform with grim satisfaction. He had made the B. & A. a little trouble, anyway—paid them back a trifle for the outraging of his bit of garden. He tramped across the new planks marked the oozing pitch and the shining nail heads with the avidness of lonely people for inconsequential things. Then he felt eyes on his back. Deafness had made him supersensitive. He turned quickly, and in the window of the little bay where the telegraph instruments lurked under the green light, he saw the girl—the red-headed girl.

She was smiling at him. Something in Henry's twisted old nature warmed and thrilled. Women smiled at him often, the same smile they gave to lame dogs or harmless half-wits. But the girl's eyes were different. They held a frank friendliness which had no pity or evasion in it. She

waved a hand at him. She was bending over a table and her hair was bound down by the elastic of a green eye-shade.

A freight pulled in then, and Henry moved off sullenly. But in the afternoon he came shuffling back, a votive offering in his pocket. Grinning diffidently he laid this gift on the window sill, soothing its protests with swift, stubby old fingers—a yellow kitten with rascally circles of black about its eyes, a comical clown of a kitten which until this hour had been the cherished member of Henry's huge feline family.

"This here one's yours," he yelled, as the girl came hurrying to the window. "If he gets the fits you lemme know and I'll fetch you some catnip."

And he turned and sped away, his shoulders hunched, without a backward look.

Began for old Henry Hornbone an amazing friendship.

Every morning he shambled down to the station at Elsie with some sort of a present in his pocket. Sometimes it was a speckled guinea egg, warm from the nest. Sometimes a brown twig softly threaded with new pussy willows, and as spring warmed and the frost went out of the land he brought little wild strawberry blooms like gold beaded stars, now a single violet, once a white snail shell scoured to brilliance. And at dusk, when the night trick came on, the girl operator, whose name was Mary Hill, came often to the old house beside the track. Sometimes she carried a paper bag warm and greasy with hot doughnuts. Sometimes her offering was a piece of kidney for the cats. Often she brought only her smile, which became the one bit of glow in old Henry's drab, baffled existence.

She mended his socks, she impelled him by her frowns to scour his floors, to shave every day in his eagerness to please, to keep the cats off the table and his boots off his bed. He even bought a black necktie and a new hat to replace the greasy old relic which had served him for twenty years. Mary Hill, with her red head and her dancing eyes, which penetrated the frozen barrier of the silence which had so long kept the old man in desolate isolation, became to him a little of the mother that he missed and something of the daughter he had never had. There were people in Elsie who laughed. There were young men at Mary Hill's boarding-house who teased her about old Henry Hornbone. But most people understood. And Henry, toiling to make a cherry tree bloom beside

the fence, forgot in his present content, his vengeful war on the B. & A.

And then came the strike.

To Henry the strike meant little. He sensed a little of it, through the things that he read in the badly printed weekly paper at Elsie, he



understood the guards who tramped up and down the right of way warning him back whenever he threw a leg over the fence. But as the trouble grew more tense, as bridges went up in horrific explosions, as trains were wrecked mysteriously and engineers intimidated, Henry saw the strain of it reflected in the harassed eyes of Mary Hill. There was a young marine in the station now, whenever he tramped down in the mornings—a cocky youth with dark eyes and a proud scowl.

A day or two after that, Henry bought a heavy calibered revolver from the blacksmith. That night he nailed a tobacco can on his woodshed, and when Mary Hill came by, he haled her in and made her practise shooting at the can till she could hit it three times out of six—till the palm of her hand was blistered by the heavy stock.

"They blew the bridge at Alapaha last night," she told him, as he rubbed melted resin on the blisters: Henry could understand much that she said by this time, if she spoke slowly and distinctly. He nodded.

"You keep this here and use it," he ordered, oiling the cylinder and loading it deftly. "Gun ain't no good if you're scart of it. And if that soldier down there gives you any sass you pop him over, too. I don't like the look of him, no time—he's too blame' smart."

A slow color crept over Mary Hill's face at this, and with it a crawling chill was communicated to old Henry's heart. There was a rift—tiny, almost imperceptible, yet appalling to the lonely old man to whom the friendship of this girl had come to be such a tremendous thing. Her eyes avoided his for an instant, then the dancing laughter came into them again. She laid the grim gun down on the back steps and snatched at the old man's hand. Henry knew what she wanted—to see that cherry tree. She had bought it for him from a fruit tree peddler and they had watched the opening of every bud. It ought to be in bloom today—every flower open. They hurried past the pie-plant row and the humming beehives. At the fence old

Henry Hornbone halted, aghast. He wavered a bit, and then black, militant wrath darkened his face.

The little cherry tree was bent sideways, half stripped of its bark, wilted, trampled. And beside it, driven grimly into the ground was a very new white post, very blatantly lettered in black—"B. & A. RAILROAD. RIGHT OF WAY."

Henry had not sworn an oath since his closing ears had shut from him the sound, of his own voice. But now he swore, shrilly, horribly. He sprang at the white post, wrenching and tugging at it, but it had been sledged into the soil by strong men. It did not budge a fraction. The girl's face was a pained mask of wretchedness. She had known that they were condemning a new right of way; that eventually, when the menace of the strike was removed, that the division was to be double-tracked, but she had not thought that it would mean this—the destruction of an old man's pitiful little interest, the ruthless slaughtering of the few simple things that made up life to old Henry, who was denied so much of life.

"Oh—shame! Shame!" she cried aloud. But old Henry did not hear. He was fairly dancing in his rage, he shook his fist at the blinking lines of track, he breathed dreadful threats. War was on again—relentless war against the B. & A. He hardly saw Mary Hill. He scarcely knew when she went away. He was busy with mallet and sledge battering that intruding post out of the ground. By dark he had loosened it and flung it over the fence on the right of way. And next morning he did not go down to the station. He worked doggedly all day, building a high barrier of barbed wire across the back of his place.

The road's lawyer battered at his front door in vain. The postman brought a letter containing a condemnation notice and a check, but the letter lay under the front door for three days before Henry found it. Then he dropped it in the kitchen stove without opening it, and renewed his grim vendetta.

The night the bridge at Hodges was destroyed he felt a gleeful satisfaction, as though he himself had

planted the charge under the pillars. He tramped out to the wrecked bridge in the morning, avoiding the right of way cannily, gloating over every twisted rail and fallen cross-tie, grinning his grin which had taken on a warped and sinister grimness. When he came back the fence he had built so laboriously was down, flung carelessly over the beehives and against the shed. In his garden—what little the road had left to him—stood a tall, narrow, yellow building.

It was a block signal tower—two stories high, flashing red and green target lights from its gables, looped about with wires, with glass windows and a locked door and about its base a wide area of piled cinders.

There was a tower like it at Hodges—but here—here in his garden! Henry stared at it in incredible amazement, made numb by baffled wrath. There was a light in the top of the yellow tower, which had manifestly been built intact elsewhere, and set down on his ground by a maintenance crew. At the bottom, slumped on the threshold, smoking a cigarette, bulked the young guard whom he had seen in the station at Elsie—the sleek-haired, insolent lad who had brought a shy, warm blush into Mary Hill's face.

As Henry approached, this young soldier motioned him away, jauntily, with the butt of an Army Colt. Henry burst into a shrill, cackling invective. The young soldier laughed. Henry retreated, presently, a long procession of cats trailing after. But for once he was too troubled, too tremulous with fury to heed the purring friendliness of his yellow-eyed family. The cats lingered in astonishment, but Henry, sagged forward on his doorstep, his eyes fixed on that tall, sulphur-hued intruder with the red and green eye in his garden, paid no attention to them. For once a pampered tribe of feline pensioners went supperless, offended and aloof.

Half the night, while the spring frogs came out and fiddled and the switch-engines hooted up and down, unheard, Henry Hornbone sat at his back door smoldering. Then a reckless idea leaped at him out of the dark, making his slow blood tingle by its very audacity. The sight of the switch engine, panting idly like a fat old hippopotamus with one eye, on the siding beyond his outraged fence inspired a wild scheme for vengeance which drove every vestige of sleep from his tired brain.

"I'll learn 'em," he said aloud. "I'll learn 'em so they'll stay learnt! I got to



get me a chain. I got to have a long chain and a wire cable. And I've got to get that feller away from there. I've got to—if I have to knock him in the head."

He remembered then where he had seen a tangled length of cable—down at Hodges where the bridge had been destroyed. It would be risky business getting it; there would be guards and they were touchy and apt to shoot. But somehow he'd work it. A stout wire cable, fastened swiftly around that block tower, a chain reaching to the tender of the switch engine—and the B. & A. would move that offending building from his land themselves!

It was a wild, fantastic plan, but the very difficulties it involved served to rouse old Henry from his lethargy of shocked rage. He pulled his hat low over his ears and slipped out the front way, following the right of way toward Hodges. He knew where the cable lay, tangled in the bottom of a ravine, where it was dark and propitious. Getting the young soldier away from the tower would be the problem. Henry considered various expedients, from setting his own house on fire to cold-blooded murder. He neared the scene of the wreck, where he could see the dangling ruin of the bridge bristling like a ship with lanterns. He could feel the down thud of hammers, as the hastily drafted maintenance crews attacked the wreckage. He crept close through a damp tangle of last year's grass, and it was then that he discovered the two men who, like himself approached cautiously. They kept just ahead of him, heads down, bodies low in the weeds.

He crawled after them, keeping back out of hearing, watching in the darkness to discover what they were up to. Strikers, he decided, since his over sensitive nose brought him no evidence that they were common, unwashed hoboos. They smelled clean—like tobacco and soap. A bit greasy, but without offense. Henry wriggled through the dry grass on their trail. They were making for a tool chest, set beside the track, he noted, and one of them presently stood boldly upright, walked to the chest, lifted something out of it, walked casually toward a group working about a flare, while the other waited, hidden.

In a few minutes the first marauder came sliding back, prone, and Henry lifted his head to see what it was they had pilfered. From the gingerly way they handled it, the caution with which they worked back to the road, he knew—dynamite!

Forgetting his own errand, avid with

childish curiosity, he followed the pair, keeping always out of sight, trailing them back to Elsie—back to his own street, back to his own house!



And here an amazing melodrama was enacted before his staring

eyes, almost before he could think. He saw the sinister two slink through his garden, saw them hurl themselves upon the young guard, beheld a waving chaos of arms and legs, heard a thrown pistol clink upon the cinders—heard with his tense nerves and his straining faculties, though his sealed ears denied him tidings of the fight. Then he saw that one of the strikers held the guard prone, and that the other was burrowing swiftly under the yellow tower. It was at that moment that Henry saw another sight which turned him cold and numb and made him forget every grievance he had ever known against the B. & A. He saw a glint of red hair at the upper window of that block tower. He saw Mary Hill standing there—her body poised in terror. In one hand she held the pistol he had given her. In the other she clutched a frightened yellow kitten.

Like a wild old warlock Henry Hornstone hurled himself into the mêlée. The dynamiters were strong men; they were desperate and they were armed with deadly brass knuckles and coupling pins. But Henry was armed with primitive rage, which goes a long way in a pitched battle. His head was barked, a fist had crashed into his teeth, a knee had found his stomach and he was feeling a strange lightness in his head—a sort of airiness which persisted in lifting him into the ether, persisted in weakening the dogged grip he had on a tough, whiskery neck. He felt himself giving in; he rallied and snatched great, aching breaths into his bursting lungs, pounding monotonously on a confusion of struggling legs with his stout old hobnailed boots, when he realized that another force had entered into the fray. A red-headed harpy, screaming and dancing, brandishing a big black pistol was circling the fight, dragging at the vindictive person who was endeavoring to choke the young soldier's breath out, battering futile fists upon unfeeling backs, sobbing in impotent wrath.

It was then that Henry dragged out of the tortured thinness of his throat a terrible, curdling scream.

"Bean him!" he yodeled, the yell cutting the air like a knife, "Bean both of 'em—with the gun."

And Mary Hill obeyed.

She beaned both of them with such efficiency that when the young soldier had struggled up and spit out his broken teeth and righted his outrageously disarranged apparel and found his gun, the whiskery pair of malcontents were still sprawled, unconsciously content, in the damp gloom of Henry's pie-plant row.

Henry himself sat up, conscious that certain very vital localities on his person had been woefully maltreated, sure that he would never be able to get a whole breath again, and if by chance he did, it would sure jolt his tortured ribs loose. But he grinned. The grin was jagged and a bit gory, but it persisted. And Mary Hill gave him a wavery, slightly tremulous smile. She still held the pistol, but Henry saw with admiration that she held it muzzle down, harmless but ready. She was a good one! And she might have been killed—blown to pieces like those ragged crosses that at Hodges! Henry struggled up.

"You better fetch somebody," he shouted at the young soldier, who was still a trifle bewildered. "You better fetch a gang to

look after them two. I'll stay here till you get back."

The guard departed, having first carefully tied the dynamiters with Henry's clothesline. Mary Hill sat down beside Henry, the big gun balanced on her knee. Her cold, small fingers crept into his palm. She was little and dear, she might have been the mother that he missed or the daughter he had never had. The old man patted her wrist gently and a slow ache swelled within him, made up of loneliness and weariness. Then a new thought comforted him. She'd be there every day—in that tower, in his garden, the green eyeshade binding down her rebellious hair. He gave a tremendous sigh and his age-old war against the B. & A. perished in lusty middle age.

At this minute two-thirds of the village of Elsie surged into his garden.

Henry shambled up, jerked his suspenders straight, hunted his hat. Men were crowding round him—he saw mouths moving excitedly, hands waving. They beat him on the back, they shook his hand. But Henry pulled away.

"Lemme alone," he yelled at the curious who milled about him. "You lemme alone. I've gotta feed my cats!"

GRAINS SEND ROOTS MANY FEET INTO EARTH

INVESTIGATORS for the Carnegie Institution of Washington have reported some interesting discoveries about the depth to which food plants send their roots. Trees and other perennials send tap-roots to a great distance into the earth, but that cereals, which start new from the seed each season, do the same, has not been generally understood. Professor John E. Weaver reports that in Nebraska wheat and oats were found to send roots down to a depth of from six to eight feet, while corn roots were found eight feet deep. New agricultural methods may result from these investigations.

HELICOPTERS MAY MAKE AIRPLANES OBSOLETE

THE next big forward step in aviation will be the helicopter. Run to your Greek dictionary and look it up. "Helicon" means spiral or screw and "pteron" means wing. Get it? Orville Wright invented the word and predicted years ago that someone would invent the machine. An airplane—though it wouldn't be a "plane" at all and we'd have to call it a "flying machine" or something like that—which was able to rise into the air by means of "screw-wings" or devices like electric fans placed horizontally, could ascend from a space no bigger than the spread of its wings, and descend, if the machinery worked properly, in a similar space. Instead of a big landing field away out in the country, such machines could start out from a city roof or a suburban back yard. Both the British and the French governments, which pay much more attention to aviation than does ours, have offered prizes for helicopters capable of doing certain "stunts." The British specifications call for a machine that will rise 2,000 feet, carrying a pilot and fuel for an hour's flight; hover stationary in the air for half an hour, and fly horizontally at 60 miles an hour. Louis Brennan, the monorail inventor, claims to have built a machine covering these requirements. Pescara, an Argentine inventor, made a helicopter that would rise six feet carrying a passenger, and sold it to the French government.



FROM ONE TO ANOTHER

By EARL C. McCAIN
Author of "Desert Justice," etc.

THE PONY EXPRESS IS NO MORE; BUT THE WEST STILL PRODUCES HORSES OF THAT NEVER-DIE BREED, AND MEN WHO DO NOT KNOW WHEN TO QUIT. HENCE THIS RACE OVER THE SANTA FÉ TRAIL HAS ALL THE THRILLS OF THE OLD DAYS—AND A FEW NEW ONES

JOHAN DILLON'S first knowledge of the Pony Express Relay Race had come from reading the newspapers. It was to be held in celebration of the old Pony Express, and the horses taking part in it would follow the old Santa Fé Trail from St. Joseph, Mo., to Santa Fe, N. M., a distance of approximately eight hundred miles.

While the race was to be run by picked relay teams of horses, the real rivalry would be between the five big express companies, which had, in a way, sprung from the old Pony Express when it had been succeeded by the more modern methods of handling express and mail. Each of the express companies was organizing a team, and the honor of winning would go to the team that first delivered a registered package of express at Santa Fe.

The entire country was interested in the race, not only because of the traditions connected with the Pony Express, but because it was a sporting event of a different type. Dillon's interest was deeper than that. He was the owner of Sagamore, a

magnificent black stallion that had already won fame as a long distance runner, and he had been expecting an offer to enter his horse in one of the teams ever since the race had been announced.

The day before he had received a telegram from John P. Hammond, president of the Dell-Argo Express Company, and he had come in from his foothill ranch to meet Hammond at the Brown hotel in Denver.

A casual observer, watching the two men as they shook hands in the hotel lobby, would probably have been struck by the similarity between them—even though they represented vastly different spheres of life. Hammond was the typical man of big business, well-groomed and modestly attired, his appearance even more distinguished by a faint tinge of gray in his hair.

Dillon was no larger than Hammond, yet he possessed the same marks of character strength. His weight would have been guessed at one hundred and forty pounds, and his eyes were steel-blue and sharp, surrounded by fine wrinkles—some-

thing that distinguishes the man who has lived on the sage-dotted mesas or the desert. The movement of his lithe body, as he stepped forward to meet Hammond, marked him as a man accustomed to a life in the saddle.

As might have been expected, Hammond came straight to the point.

"I represent the Dell-Argo Express Company, Mr. Dillon," he began, "and we are particularly anxious to win this race because our company was really the pioneer express company of the West. I understand you have a great horse, and my purpose in coming here is to offer you five thousand dollars to handle the Dell-Argo team and enter your own horse. The company will pay all expenses, and in addition, you will have a chance at the five thousand dollar purse."

"What other horses have you?"

"None, at this time. That will be in your hands. It is only fair to tell you that you may have trouble securing suitable horses for the race. Dan Mortley, who, I understand, bore a shady reputation in racing circles before he was made a superintendent of the Continental Express Company through the influence of a wealthy uncle, is managing their team. I'm sure that the Continental company wouldn't permit any crookedness in the race if they knew of it, but they're letting Mortley handle their team because he understands horse-racing, and are allowing him plenty of money. Frankly, I think Mortley intends to win by fair or foul means. He has already prevented us from getting several horses we wanted."

"How about the other express companies?"

"Oh, they will have teams entered, but it is generally believed that Mortley's team will make a walk-away of the race, since he already has engaged many of the best endurance runners in the country. Do you happen to know of any other horses that you can get?"

"Yes, two," Dillon stated, then with a smile added, "and that reminds me that I had better accept your offer at once."

"Good," Hammond replied. "I'll leave for St. Joseph tonight, to complete arrangements, and to secure some more horses for you. Get those two you mentioned, and better ship them as soon as possible. The race is to begin Thursday morning, April 3, the anniversary of the first trip of the Pony Express."

They discussed plans a few minutes longer, then with a Dell-Argo check for

one thousand dollars in his pocket, Dillon left Hammond and hurried out to send a telegram.



Dillon had tried not to appear eager when accepting Hammond's offer and check, but the truth was that he was elated. For the first time in his life he was seriously in need of money and the offer had come at an opportune time.

A few months before he had happened upon what seemed a splendid buy on a herd of cattle—one so good that in order to close the deal he had mortgaged his ranch for ten thousand dollars. He had considered himself lucky in getting the cattle at such a price, and had planned on borrowing enough money on the herd to take up the note when it became due. Then had come a sudden epidemic of the foot and mouth disease that had wiped out most of his herd, and caused the Government agents to kill the remainder to prevent the disease from spreading.

Dillon had expected no trouble in renewing his mortgage when that came due, but to his surprise, the bank had refused this. In a final effort to save his ranch, Dillon had been forced to give another mortgage on his most valued possession—Sagamore. Two more efforts to raise money had failed, and now, unless he could take up the mortgage on Sagamore when it fell due, he would lose the horse. Under the circumstances, Hammond's offer was providential.

In telling Hammond that he knew of two horses for his team, Dillon's first thought had been of Patsy, a game little cowhorse that had raced Sagamore to the very finish in a former race. Patsy was owned by Laramie Jones, at Laramie, Wyoming, and Dillon sent a wire to Jones a few minutes after accepting Hammond's offer.

The second horse was Imperator, a great white stallion owned by Gus Workland, of Denver, and Dillon made a prompt visit to the Workland stables. Imperator was getting old, but he was dead game, and he had the ability to hold a good speed for a long distance. Dillon lost no time in making arrangements with Workland to ship the horse in plenty of time for the race.

Early the next morning Dillon received an answer to his wire to Jones, accepting his offer for the little cowhorse. Satisfied with the start he had made in gathering a team, Dillon returned to his ranch

that noon. The following day he loaded Sagamore into the express car that was to take them to St. Joseph.

Hammond met Dillon and his horse upon their arrival in the city where the race was to start, but he brought disappointing news. In spite of his efforts, he had secured only two horses. One of these was Speedway—one of the fastest horses of the year—but the other, a big bay called Pathfinder, was a horse that Dillon knew well. The bay horse could run for a time, but he simply lacked the endurance to match his courage in a long race.

"I have wired or seen at least twenty owners," Hammond stated, "but Mortley has beaten us to most of them. Besides the horses he intends to use, he has taken options on most of the other horses that would be suitable for this race."

Dillon nodded quietly, and Hammond, in a more optimistic tone, went on, "We'll have a chance, however, even with only five horses. The Continental is the only company that will have more than ten horses in their string, and the rest of the express companies have made arrangements with the railroads to move the horses and riders along the route as they finish each lap of the race."

Dillon couldn't exactly share Hammond's enthusiasm. He knew that very few horses can recover their strength and endurance while traveling in an express car. But he didn't mention his doubts. Instead, he talked with Hammond a few minutes longer, then went to see that his horse had been properly cared for.

Jones, with his little roan horse, arrived in St. Joseph that night and came to the hotel just as Dillon and Hammond had finished dinner. The same old quizzical smile that had won Dillon's friendship during a former race was on the Wyoming rider's face as he shook hands and was introduced to Hammond.

"I'm with you, all the way," Jones said, when Dillon had told him of the race and the handicap under which their team must run. "But we'll sure have to keep an eye on that Mortley gang. Mortley's crooked, even if he has got the confidence of the Continental officials. He had the nerve to try to bribe me to throw the race to their team in case we are near them at the finish."

"What did you say to him?" Hammond asked.

"I told him to go, to hell."

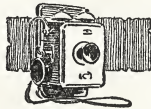
Hammond and Dillon both smiled, then Jones continued.

"That ain't the worst of it, though. He found out you had leased Emperor, and he's taken the horse away from us. Workland's a hog for money, and Mortley offered him twice what you did and agreed to run the horse only the last lap of the race. Mortley boasted that he may not have to use Emperor at all, but he's willing to pay that money just to keep us from using the horse."

That news was a bitter disappointment to Dillon. He had reasoned that of his string only Sagamore, Speedway and Emperor were capable of any great speed. Pathfinder might make a good showing, and he might not, while Patsy, while fast and game to the core, was, after all, only a cow-pony and hardly to be expected to more than hold his own against the Continental thoroughbreds.

Pathfinder and Speedway arrived the day before the race was to begin, and Dillon began carrying out his plans. He sent Jones to Valley Falls with Patsy, a distance of fifty miles, and Pathfinder on to Topeka. He intended to start the race with Speedway and hold Sagamore until the contest was well under way.

The starting time of the race had been set at seven o'clock the next morning, but



Dillon was awakened long before that time by the ringing of his telephone. A voice over the wire told him that one of his

horses had been injured, and he finished dressing as he ran to the stables where the horses were being kept.

He found several men gathered about one of his stalls when he arrived and learned that it was Speedway the message had been about. The horse was limping from pain each time he stepped, and his right foreleg was badly swollen. Speedway's rider, who had volunteered to sleep near the horse that night, exhibited a small piece of blood-stained piano-wire as he tried to explain.

"They must have got to Speedway some time yesterday, because I rather thought he was favoring that foot a little when I exercised him last night. He woke me up by kicking his stall a little while ago, and when I examined his leg, I found this drawn tight around it, just under the fetlock. It had cut into the hide and caused the tendon to start swelling."

The anger that every lover of horses feels at seeing a noble animal injured—perhaps ruined for life—surged through Dillon as he examined Speedway's leg. But he said nothing. The horse was out of the race for several days, he knew, but he realized the impossibility of finding the guilty person before the start of the contest. He found Sagamore uninjured, then called a veterinary to care for Speedway and returned to his hotel to alter his plans.

Hammond was dismayed at the news of Speedway's injury, and after breakfast, went to report the matter to the race officials. Dillon settled his account at the hotel, then returned to the stable and walked Sagamore to the open space surrounding a stone monument from which the race was to start.

Through the iron bars surrounding the memorial, Dillon read the inscription it bore: "Dedicated to the Pony Express, which started from this point April 3, 1860."

As Dillon dismounted in front of the railing Hammond came forward to meet him, carrying a small express pouch which bore a figure "3." This bag was to contain the registered parcel of express and would be passed from rider to rider of the Dell-Argo team, Hammond explained, and the figure would identify the team. Dillon, glancing at the other riders, noticed that each carried a similar pouch, though the bags bore different numbers.

"There's Mortley," Hammond remarked, indicating a sharp-faced, heavily-built man who had walked over to a slim sorrel horse. Dillon studied Mortley as the Continental team manager stood talking to the rider of the sorrel, and he decided that Jones' summary of Mortley had been correct. Mortley's face showed cunning and cruelty—the kind of a man who might injure a horse in order to win a race.

The contest had aroused nation-wide interest, and Sagamore, because of his great size and beauty, drew the attention of the crowd that had gathered to witness the start. The horse towered above the other animals waiting to enter the race, but his great body was evenly proportioned—the withers high and the muscles long and clean—hinting of the speed and endurance of which he was capable.

The mayor of the city and a grizzled old man, the latter once a Pony Express rider himself, had been selected as official starters of the race, and a hush fell upon

the crowd as they arrived. The mayor climbed to the top of the monument, then called the express company officials and the riders closer as he made a short address, dealing with the history of the Pony Express and the significance of the occasion.

Outside the iron railing a clerk was seated at a table on which lay an open ledger, and in this, Dillon and the other riders wrote their names and the names of their horses. Then each rider was given a small, registered parcel, the horses were lined up before the railing, and at a signal from the old express rider, the race was on.

All five of the riders were experienced men, so there was no bolting of horses at the start. Instead, they cantered down the city streets to the outskirts, then picked up a bit more speed as they swung out upon the historic old trail. Realizing that Sagamore's great strength would probably be tested to the utmost before the race ended, Dillon held the big stallion back a trifle, though he could easily have taken the lead.

The great highway extends almost due west from St. Joseph for some distance, then dips gradually to the long bridge that spans the Missouri River. Sagamore's hoofs beat a lone rhythm as he followed the other horses across the bridge, then Dillon allowed him to lengthen his stride sufficiently to follow them closely. Near the outskirts of Atchison, the first change station, Dillon spoke to the big horse and let him speed up so as to reach the station on even terms with the other horses.

The other teams changed horses and riders at Atchison, but Dillon was to ride on through. He swung from the saddle



to register his package and secure a drink for his horse, then resumed his ride. The rider of the Interstate team had been

slow in getting away from the change station, and Dillon overtook him a few miles from the outskirts of the city.

A mile farther on Dillon and the Interstate rider came upon a bay gelding that had loosened a shoe and was striking his leg when he stepped. This horse belonged to the Overland team. The rider carried no tools, but Dillon did, and it required but a moment to remove the horse's front shoes. The bay, once the dangerous shoe had been removed, had good speed,

and the three horses traveled together into Valley Falls, overtaking the National Express Company rider just before they reached the city limits.

Jones was waiting at the Valley Falls station with the game little roan and Dillon transferred the Dell-Argo package to him. Dillon stood watching a moment, as Jones, cowboy fashion, twisted in his saddle to wave, then he turned to Hammond, who had been waiting at the station.

"How's Speedaway?" he inquired, since Hammond had remained in St. Joseph for a short time after the start of the race.

"Out of the race, except perhaps at the very end. The tendon is badly swollen, but the veterinary hopes to have him in shape to run within three or four days. By the way, I had a talk with John Bristol, president of the Continental, before I left St. Joseph. He thinks we're mistaken about Mortley having anything to do with injuring Speedaway, but he assured me that he'll have the judges keep a close watch on Mortley the remainder of the race. He says that Mortley has spent a lot of company money and bet all the cash he could raise himself on the Continental team, but it's a certainty the company won't back him in any crookedness."

Hammond had arranged for an express car on the afternoon train, and after caring for his horse and hiring the city marshal to guard the car while he was away, Dillon and Hammond ate lunch at a nearby restaurant, then returned to the depot. The afternoon train took the car into Topeka on good time, and Dillon looked up Pathfinder's rider, a slim youth by the name of Montauk, to make arrangements for Pathfinder to run to Council Grove, a distance of three change stations.

It was late afternoon when the first horse, carrying an Interstate rider, raced up to the Topeka change station and registered his package. Jones came in second, smiling with satisfaction that his little roan had outgamed three faster horses. Pathfinder at once set out for Council Grove with the Dell-Argo package, and an hour later, Dillon and Jones, with their horses, were asleep in the speeding express car, resting while the opportunity offered.

Hammond had arranged accommodations for his riders and horses along the route, but Dillon ignored the hotels when he reached Council Grove. He had already experienced the underhand methods of Dan Mortley, so he finished his night's sleep on a cot in Sagamore's stall.

The riders were expected in Council Grove about eight o'clock the next morning, so Dillon took his time at breakfast. Then, making sure that Sagamore was ready, he walked the horse to the change station. Pathfinder was the third horse to arrive at the station, and after instructing Montauk about shipping his horse ahead, Dillon and Sagamore again took up the race.

The contest had developed into a steady grind by this time, each team fighting to gain and hold the lead. The National rider had led out of Council Grove—riding a trim iron-gray mare—but Mortley had now begun to use his faster horses. When Sagamore's steady gait enabled him to overtake one of the leading horses within the first ten miles, it proved to be the National mare.

Sagamore was running easily, his long, free lope clipping off the miles. It was twenty-six miles to Herrington, the next change station, and he allowed Sagamore to show a bit more speed in the last five miles. Even then, the Continental had already changed and sent its package on ahead when Dillon reached the station.

From Herrington the trail swings south to Marion, another stretch of twenty-six miles. South of Lincolnville, the halfway point, Sagamore caught up with the Continental rider. Realizing that this rider would not yield his place without a bitter race that might injure both horses, Dillon was content to ride into Marion on even terms.

Another Continental horse was waiting at the Marion station—this one a fine bay stallion that stood quivering with eagerness. Sagamore had already run fifty-two miles that day, but Dillon knew the great beast's power, so he clung steadily to the fast pace set by the bay. Mile after mile the two horses galloped down the dust-swept highway, then the bay began to weaken from the terrific pace and Dillon felt the elation of knowing that he led in the contest.

The shaggy little cow-horse was waiting with a thoroughbred racer of the Continental string when Dillon rode up to the station at Canton and transferred the registered parcel to his team-mate.

"Somebody tried to get into Patsy's stall last night," Jones said, patting a gun that swung on his hip. "I got a permit from the sheriff here and strapped on my old hardware. The man that tries to hurt my horse will be askin' St. Peter who won this race."

"Good," Dillon replied. "I'm packing a gun myself, and I'll use it before I'll let anyone cripple my horse."

From McPherson, across the wheat fields of Kansas, the lead alternated between the Continental and Dell-Argo teams. Patsy lost the lead in his lap of the race, but his rider turned the package over to Pathfinder on good time at Ellinwood. The lean bay horse surprised both Dillon and Hammond by leading the race into Garfield.

Sagamore made the run to Dodge City that night and still held the lead, but the faster horses of the Continental string forged ahead of Patsy the next day. At Garden City, Pathfinder had cut down the Continental lead to less than an hour. Dillon crowded Sagamore as much as he dared that day, but Mortley was changing horses every twenty-five miles, and he still retained the lead at Lamar, Colorado.

At La Junta, where Dillon had to wait for a change of trains, he received a telegram from Hammond, at Trinidad, that increased his confidence of winning. Speedway had recovered from his injury and would arrive at Las Vegas that night. Dillon replied by wire, requesting Hammond to send Speedway to the last change station at Glorieta, N. M., from where he could carry the package into Santa Fe. Dillon had wanted that honor for Sagamore, but he thought it better to let a fresh horse race against Imperator at the finish.

Jones brought the Dell-Argo package through Las Animas and La Junta and swung southward toward the New Mexico boundary, ending a long, hard ride at Timpas. Dillon was waiting with his big stallion at Trinidad when the telephone brought news that seemed to end the Dell-Argo chances of winning. Pathfinder had given out after leaving Hoehne, the first town north of Trinidad, and was coming in at a walk. The rules permitted a rider to go back to meet a crippled team-mate, so Dillon quickly saddled Sagamore and rode back.

Montauk was heart-broken that his horse had failed after making such a good showing earlier in the race, but Dillon blamed neither the horse nor his rider. Pathfinder's condition showed that he had simply collapsed. With a quick handshake

that means much between good sportsmen, Dillon took the package and turned back toward Trinidad. He was an hour behind the Continental rider when he registered at Trinidad, but he was still determined to win if possible.

From Trinidad, the trail enters the mountains, and here Sagamore was at his best. Without urging and without holding back, Dillon let the big horse set his own pace. Power is what counts most when a horse is climbing steadily, and Sagamore's mighty chest was the main factor in the long climb to Raton Pass—the long passage through the crest of the mountains. About half-way through the Pass, Sagamore overtook and passed the Continental horse—a fine animal, but one unaccustomed to such travel.

Several airplanes had been following the running horses during the latter part of the race, and Dillon had learned that these planes were covering the race for newspaper associations and motion picture weeklies. Just outside Raton, Dillon heard the drone of an engine overhead and a shaft of light from an airplane caught and held the big horse and his rider for an instant. Dillon merely supposed this was one of the news planes, but he learned more of it when he arrived at the Raton change station.

"See anything of an airplane as you came in?" the station man inquired.

"Yes, just outside Raton. Why?"

"Nothing in particular, only Mortley, the manager of the Continental team, was seen talking to an aviator at Trinidad, and the judges have noticed that one plane follows the horses at night."

Dillon gave the airplane no further thought as he registered his package, and resumed his way. His principal worry was that Patsy, worn out from his long run of the preceding day, would be unable to hold his own against the Continental horses that day. He resolved to save the little roan every possible mile and let Sagamore gallop freely as he rode from Raton.

From Raton to Maxwell the highway passes no towns and few habitations. Mile after mile slipped by as the big horse, with the same gameness that had characterized the Pony Express carriers in bygone days, clung grimly to his pace. Past Maxwell and on to Springer, Dillon rode, turning the package over to Jones long after daylight had come.

Dillon had intended to relieve Patsy at Las Vegas that afternoon, but he changed



his mind when he saw the condition of the little horse at Springer.

Hammond had chartered an engine to take their express car to Las Vegas at once, but as Dillon led Sagamore into the car, he said, "I guess I'd better stop at Watros. Patsy isn't much on speed, and he's about gone his limit at fast running. Speedaway will be waiting to finish at Glorieta, so I'd better relieve Jones as quickly as possible."

"But, good Lord, man, how about your own horse? He's carried the brunt of the race so far, and he's just finished running all night long."

"I know," Dillon replied, a touch of sentiment in his voice, "but that's our only chance. We must reach Glorieta on even terms or Imperator will nose out Speedaway in the final stretch."

As Dillon had predicted, Patsy lost time and the lead in the race during the fifty



miles from Springer, though Dillon did not know of this until Hammond awakened him that afternoon.

The airplanes and the telephone were keeping a close check on the race and reports were being sent ahead. At Colmor, Patsy had still retained the lead, but north of Nolan the Continental horse had passed him and a fresh horse starting at Wagon Mound had added to the gain.

Dillon, Hammond and a Continental rider were waiting at the Watros station when an airplane swept over the crest of a hill and landed in an open space near the change station. The pilot and a cameraman climbed from the plane and selected a position from which to film the arrival of the horses. Then a big black, with four white stockings, rounded a turn and raced up to the station.

Dillon gave a start as he recognized the horse. It was August Long's Conquest, one of the greatest racers on the American turf, and Dillon realized anew the limits to which Mortley had gone in order to win.

The waiting Continental rider, mounted on a well-built sorrel, was on his way almost as soon as Conquest's rider had touched the ground. Then came an agonizing wait for Dillon. He knew that Patsy could not be expected to cope with the speed of Conquest after what the little horse had already done, yet it hurt him to

think that each leap of the sorrel was carrying the Continental package farther and farther ahead while the big, patient stallion could only wait.

Ten minutes, then fifteen passed, while Dillon and Hammond stood waiting. The watch-hands showed that the Continental rider had a twenty-minute lead when the little roan, lathered with perspiration and trembling in every muscle, yet still running, galloped up to the station.

"We done our best," Jones said, stumbling as he climbed from the saddle. "I nosed out their first horse, but that black devil was too fast for us."

"We know that, Laramie," Dillon answered, and leaving Hammond to explain further, he leaped upon Sagamore. His last view of the station, as Sagamore swept round a turn in the street, was of a worn out little horse standing with outspread legs and heaving sides.

Dillon knew that a twenty-minute lead meant miles to the Continental team, and he determined to overcome that handicap as soon as possible. Accordingly, he sent Sagamore forward at a fast lope. At Las Vegas, which he reached just at dusk, the ledger showed that the Continental had registered and changed horses twelve minutes ahead of him.

The gain encouraged Dillon and he left Las Vegas confident of overtaking the rival team before reaching the next change station. But he was doomed to disappointment. At Chappelle, he found that the other team was twenty-five minutes ahead of him, and that a relief rider had gone back on the trail to meet his team-mate.

The unexpected gain puzzled Dillon. He knew that the Continental horses were fast, and he began to wonder if, in his great desire to win, he had overtaxed his own horse. He knew that days of hard, steady running—with sleep broken by the swaying of railway cars—will wear down the endurance of any horse. And yet, strangely, Sagamore seemed to be running easily.

As a test, he spoke to the horse and the speed with which Sagamore responded caused him to tighten the reins a trifle. Fulton was the next change station, and Dillon found encouragement there. He had cut down the Continental lead to thirty-two minutes, and once past the change station, he sent Sagamore forward at racing speed.

A few miles out of Glorieta and the sun began tinting the sky, making the road safer, even if it meant no increase in Sag-

amore's speed. Daylight showed the perspiration lathered about the horse's shoulders and flanks, while the sound of his breathing told Dillon that the strain of the race was showing on the horse.

Except for a little group of men about the change station, the town of Glorieta was wrapped in slumber as the big horse thundered across a plank bridge at the outskirts and came to a halt at the station.

Speedaway was nowhere in sight, and Dillon caught the station man's arm as he asked, "Where's the other Dell-Argo horse?"

"We haven't seen any other horse—except the one belonging to the Continental team, and he left here two minutes ago," was the answer. Another man had brought a bucket of water and was holding it to Sagamore's mouth. With a quick decision, Dillon checked the horse from drinking, then scrawled his name on the ledger and leaped back into the saddle.

"It's up to us, old fellow," he said to the horse as he turned into the highway and rode from the town, followed by the cheers of those at the change station.

Just outside Glorieta the trail swings in a great half-circle to pass a mountain, then zig-zags between hills and gulches almost all the way into Santa Fe. Through narrow passes and around sharp turns the black horse raced, his sureness of foot saving himself and his rider time after time.

The last few miles of the road is straight, stretching like a boulevard to the city limits, and it was on this road that Dillon caught his first glimpse of Imperator. The grand old horse was half a mile ahead, doing his best as he had always done, and Dillon knew that the final test of speed must come in that stretch.

He leaned over Sagamore's glistening neck, talking to him and urging him to the utmost, realizing that the loss of this race would mean the loss of his horse—a horse

that he loved like a brother. The white horse had courage, and he made a brilliant try in that last mile, but the youth of Sagamore was too much for him. Up and up crept the black head until it caught and passed the white nose, then Sagamore led the way through Santa Fe's ancient streets to the judges' stand.

Hammond and Jones were both waiting when Dillon leaped from his horse in front of the clicking cameras and the cheering crowd to deliver his package to the judges.

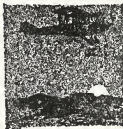
Then, suddenly aware of his own weariness, he placed a hand on the shoulders of Hammond and Jones and asked, "What happened to Speedaway?"

"His car was brought on through to Santa Fe," Hammond replied. "Either the train crew mistook their orders and failed to leave it at Glorieta, or Mortley bribed them to do that."

"Well, we've won anyway," Dillon said, smiling quietly.

"We had already," Hammond stated.

"The judges were suspicious of that air-



plane following the horses at night and had the trail watched last night. They found that Mortley had hired that aviator to take the Continental package from his rider between Las Vegas and Chappelle last night and carry it ahead to his next rider, who rode back to get it. That forfeited the race, and ends Mortley's connection with the Continental, because Bristol discharged him as soon as he heard of it. You'd have won the race if you had walked Sagamore all the way from Las Vegas."

And Dillon, as he stroked Sagamore's glistening mane, understood the mysterious gain that his great horse had striven so hard to overcome during the night.

SOME EASY TESTS FOR DIAMONDS

HERE are half a dozen easy tests for diamonds. Real diamonds will stand up under all of them, but no imitation can come through any of them. First, try a file; if it makes a scratch the stone is an imitation. Second, cover the stone with borax, heat it and drop it into cold water; an imitation will burst, but a real diamond will not be harmed. Third, drop a little hydrofluoric acid on it; this will dissolve it if it is not genuine. Fourth, drop it into a tumbler of water; if real it will still shine brilliantly. Fifth, put a drop of water on it; if the water spreads it is not a real diamond, but if the drop retains its globular shape the gem is real. Sixth, make a pencil dot on a piece of white paper, with a lens focus the light upon the dot, hold the stone near the paper; if the dot can be seen clearly through the stone it is a diamond, but if the dot appears foggy or duplicated the stone is false.



DESERT DRIFT

By JOHN BRIGGS

Author of "The Last of the Kings," etc.

EAST AND WEST MEET ON THE TREACHEROUS SANDS OF THE PAINTED DESERT; AND ONLY THE SANDS WHICH SAW THE MEETING CAN TELL OF THE FATE OF THE BLACK OPAL, WHICH WAS THE HERITAGE OF AN ANCIENT DYNASTY

ONE First Class Passage—Prince Yuen Ming Chu.” Thus his American Pacific Liner passport had read, thirty years ago.

The Chinaman halted his time-and-wind-worn outfit in the sickly shadow of a smoke tree. He was clad in blue jumper and overalls. His gray felt hat was peaked after the common fashion of the desert country. With hands long accustomed to the task, he slipped his diamond hitch, removed his bed roll, kiaks and canvas water bags, and after a few final jerks with the cinches, he had uncovered a dust-hued beast so diminutive that the revelation might have startled a casual observer.

After staking the little animal where it could enjoy some very dry galleta grass, Prince Yuen Ming Chu accomplished a feat never duplicated before his time, nor since, on the drifting surface of the Painted Desert. He picked up a long roll of heavy pongee, from one end of which projected a large bamboo stick.

Holding one hand under the end of the innocent-looking roll and pulling down on the bamboo, there suddenly came into being a flowery and dragon-festooned sunshade of immense size. He gave another pull, and the bamboo stick lengthened out several feet. The end of it he stuck down

into the sand, and then from the eaves of the contraption he unfolded four stay rods. With these in position, he gave a pull at a cord, and behold! the big umbrella divided itself at the peak, and curtains dropped to the ground. Yuen Ming Chu parted the curtains at one side and drew them up at the opposite side, allowing for air circulation, whenever the air should decide to circulate.

Laying a grass mat down under his silken shelter and seating himself, he proceeded to undo the rawhide thongs of his laced boots. One might have noticed that the fingers so deftly engaged were very long and delicately tapered. This Celestial son could not deny himself the simple luxury of washing his feet, notwithstanding the scarcity of water. That accomplished, he exhaled with deep satisfaction, slipped his sensitive toes into loose sandals and went about under the smoke tree gathering fallen twigs with which to cook his rice and brew his tea.

For thirty years he had wandered under the far stretches of brilliant skies and over the tinted dunes that had been as home to him for so long. He had pitched his dragon tent under the lee of the purple and vermilion cliffs and at the foot of God's Altar Stones, the needle pinnacles of an old continent which seemed to pierce the

riotous sunset heavens. He had communed with eternal quiet and had become the intimate of the stars by night. He had come to America on an Imperial mission, and hopeless as it had seemed for years, he had pursued it long after the fall of Imperial power in China; for his heart was in the task.

His quest was the recovery of the wondrous black opal, talisman of the Ancient Tsins, pillaged by a band of smugglers from the old Palace of the early



Manchus at Mukden. Under disguise he had followed the smugglers to their stronghold in Lower California. He had joined them. By assiduous cunning, he had located the great

jewel. And then, almost successful, his plans to regain it had been suspected. A furious chase had led him through the wildest regions into Arizona and on up into the Painted Desert. One by one he had accounted for his quarry until one alone remained. And then that one had perished in a sand storm which had buried him and his fabulously precious burden without a trace.

The shifting face of the desert had altered with the long years of Prince Chu's search, he was an old man now. He knew the arid region as a parent knows his wilful offspring. He had witnessed the strange and various vegetation creep slowly over the dunes which he had with his own hands shoveled aside. He had seen old dunes melt and blow away, and new ones rise. Now he was bound southward across the desert to Flagstaff, thence homeward. He had found the ancient talisman of the Tsins, the remarkable black opal, the most precious stone, at least in his understanding, in the world. The silver-haired old Oriental could hardly picture the changes which had taken place in his native land. He could not fit his imagination to what he would find at the other end of his long journey; but here he was leaving peace.

With a gesture almost of reluctance, he stood erect and raised his arms in a simple obeisance before partaking of his last meal there. It was a leave-taking of reverence and almost of sadness. His glance traveled to the northwest and fixed itself on the far horizon meditatively. In the dis-

tance the hazy cliffs were slowly being obscured by an undefined cloud which seemed without dependence on the sky—a volume yellowish and murky. The dunes were stifled in dead calm. Nothing moved. Only the heat waves writhed upward as though to lick the still air in their ravenous thirst.

"It will be another hour, maybe," speculated Prince Chu. "Then the Twin Gods of Thunder Mountain will begin to sweep the desert." He had learned the legends of the desert peoples, and he had found beauty in their poetry. In his eyes smoldered a certain brilliancy—the look of a dreamer. In his sensitive lips, in his long, thin-bridged nose, spoke ages of refinement. Prince Yuen Ming Chu's family history stretched back two thousand years, even to the ancient Tsins.

After eating, he carefully rinsed and packed his fragile porcelain rice and tea bowls. Emerging from under his sunshade, he righted one of the kiaks, and was about to repack it, when some inner sense warned him to straighten up and look back of him.

Staring at him, about forty feet away, were two individuals of the genus homo and otherwise not easily classifiable. One was taller than the other, and the shorter one seemed the most ragged of the two. Their much-traveled appearance suggested that they had been somewhere; but their lack of any equipment for a journey aroused Prince Chu's suspicion that their destination might be "just anywhere to get away from where they had been." He rightly guessed that their object was to put a considerable distance between themselves and the Hopi Reservation.

He had been long enough in the country to recognize these two specimens as a certain brand of unscrupulous white riff-raff, driven from the city slums, which was given to preying upon the Indians, in one way or another. It was evident that they were leaving the Hopi people under circumstances of haste. In one swift glance he gleaned all of this, and then continued unconcernedly with his packing.

After their astonished survey of the dragon tent, the pair limped nearer.

"Hey! Got any water?" croaked one.

In response, Prince Chu merely grunted and poured water from one of the bags into the stew pan which he happened to have in his hand. Still squatting on his heels, he handed it to the man who reached for it, and the other, the shorter one, made a grab for the bag.

The old Chinaman drew it back and held up his hand in refusal. He was particular about who drank from his water bags.

The bandy-legs growled a curse and reached lightning-quick toward his hip, but 'as quickly checked the motion. "Wot'n 'ell d' yuh mean?" he hoarsely demanded. "Can'tcha give uh man uh drink?"

"No savvy," responded Yuen serenely.

"Don't get too ripe, Shorty," cautioned the taller, bleak-nosed one with red-rimmed eyes. "Take uh swig outa this."

After draining the tin, the ragged Shorty extended it for more.

Obligingly, indifferently, Prince Chu refilled it.

"Can'tcha talk English?" questioned the sun-blistered rogue.

Yuen Ming Chu, the scholar, simply shrugged, shook his head and smiled. Though granting them their needs, with a courtesy inherently his, he desired speedy riddance of his unwelcome guests. An eye even less discerning than his would have marked them as a cold-blooded pair. A weapon bulged in the hip pocket of each, and their movements were nervous and jerky. Obviously they were assassins and drug addicts. The old Chinaman's only weapon, an antiquated shotgun, was still strapped to his pack.

"The freak is uh Chink!" suddenly exclaimed the tall one. The speaker's beak nose and pasty cheek points gleamed strikingly. Apparently the sun had not affected the small area of his face which was exposed.

"Got anything to eat, John?" he questioned. Then, as an after-thought, he performed the motions of consuming food.

"All li—all li!" acknowledged Yuen. He put more rice to cook, and added his last piece of bacon. Covertly watching his guests, who had stretched themselves out under the smoke tree to wait, he observed that they were stealthily watching him also. Their conversation was low mumbled. They evidently mistrusted that he might understand them; but they were careless enough to let escape a few words which could be caught by the ears so long attuned to desert stillness.

"Damn funny—Chink out here—Yeh, runnin' hop t' the Injuns— Got it?— Sure 'eez got it. All Chinks uh got it!—Huh?"

They ate their rice with poor grace, frequently casting surreptitious glances over his outfit. Yuen led the small burro in from its dry grazing and readjusted the pack-saddle. He faced the burro so that his gun would be on the opposite side of the saddle from the two thugs. He perceived that they were suspicious. An astute reason counseled him that their suspicion of him could arise only from their offensive intentions. A deduction in which he was right.

His long, facile fingers were not quite quick enough to release the straps holding the shotgun before the red-eyed one had sprung up on his long legs and had covered him with a mean-looking automatic. Plainly the man was a professional killer. His order to "Get 'em up in a hurry!" was undebatable.

Prince Chu neither hesitated nor hastened. He simply accepted his strategic defeat. The malign glint of the red-rimmed eyes behind the black bore of the implacable-looking instrument of death, seemed to project a cold eagerness along their line of vision; as though hungering for the sight of a blood splash at the spot upon which their stare was fixed. The tip of the man's protuberant nose quivered like that of a beast scenting his quarry. The Chinaman dispassionately made note that the drug degenerate would welcome an excuse to murder.

"No more stallin', Chink," the voice grated. "Yuv got the stuff somewhere. Come through!"

Had the speaker known that he was addressing a man in whose blood flowed the quality of blood which had ruled China for two thousand years; and that governing the unaltered expression of the face he was looking into, there was the kind of mind at work which is dangerous to cross even when deprived of every vestige of defense, he would not have hesitated to release the death which his taut forefinger begged to deliver. But he was not yet aware of his mistake.

"Let's have it!" he barked again. "Show us where it is."

"No savvy," repeated Prince Yuen Ming Chu.

"Hey, Squint," interrupted the scalded-faced Shorty, "maybe the crazy Chink don't savvy!"

"He savvies, all right," was the response.



"Step around from behind that donkey, there, yuh heathen. Quick!"

Yuen obeyed. He knew that the murderer would shoot if he did not.

The renegade laughed. "All right, John. Now yer commencin' t' learn English. Where's the stuff?"

Prince Chu took his second discomfiture collectedly.

"I admit that I can speak your language," he said, "but you have not made it plain what it is that you want of me."

"Holy fish!" the gunman exclaimed. "What next? Yuh can talk, can'tcha? Whadda we want, huh? We want the hop, the snowflakes, or whatever kind yuh peddle. An' we want it right now—get me?"

"You are mistaken," replied Yuen. "I do not peddle opiates. I have nothing of the kind. If I had, I would gladly let you have it."

The Squint made only one response to this.

"Hell! He's stallin'. Go through 'im, Shorty. Try his pack first."

The short and ragged one tore the pack to pieces and left no space the size of a lead pencil unsearched. He finished his fruitless task in exasperation.

"Clean out His Nibs next," commanded the pasty-nosed ruffian.

Panting from his exertions and the blistering sun, the plunderer stepped up

behind their victim, and keeping himself out of gun range, he deftly felt through Prince Chu's garments.

"I have not what you want," stated the Chinaman calmly.

"Yuh haven't, hey! Then wot's this?"

The eager fingers were fumbling with the clasp of a long, flat pocket case, black leather bound.

"It contains medicines, and certain chemicals, but nothing of value to you. Yes—cigarettes. Help yourself."

The case opened suddenly. Viewing an array of little vials, the searcher noticed one containing a white, crystalline powder, and his glum expression lightened immediately. He jerked out the vial and dropped the case to earth.

"Here's the snow, Squint!" he rasped excitedly, working at the cork.

The gun-wielder's drawn face relaxed in pleasurable anticipation.

"Mistaken again," remarked the measured voice of Yuen Ming Chu. "It is an anti-venom, to be used in case of snake-bite. Should you use that as you would cocaine, without first having been bitten by a snake or the black spider, it would kill you."

The blue-bearded gunman's face clouded with anger. "If that's unthother bluff, Chink," he threatened, "I'll croak yuh!" "It is not a bluff," responded the silver-haired Oriental.

Sensing truth in the impassive words, the tall man ordered his partner to further rifle the Chinaman's person.

Prince Chu's face was still steadily expressionless.

"You are wasting your time," he said.

"Well, wot in 'ell er yuh doin' in this country, anyhow?" peevishly questioned Shorty, of the blistered face.

Before his question could be answered his exploring fingers encountered a chain of heavy linked gold about the Chinaman's neck, and he yanked at it.

"Wot's this?" he demanded.

For the first time, he might have seen a change come into their victim's expression. Exultantly observant, his partner directed him to snip the chain. When the chain had been removed by the practised use of a small pair of sharp nippers, the two crooks beheld at its end the most marvelous stone that they had ever seen. As large around as the rim of a tea cup, it covered Shorty's palm, while the gold chain glittered unheeded down from his hand. In the half-shadow of his hat, the opalescent lights flamed from the great jewel with a rapidity of changing fire which seemed alive—emerald, crimson, orange, pink and blue; fascinating, benumbing.

"My God! It's worth a million!" gasped Shorty.

Prince Chu's stern old lips curled slightly upward in their irony.

"Do not make a second mistake, my friend," he said. "In your dollars, it is worth ten millions. But if you should find it possible to dispose of the jewel, it would be worth your life."

"Wot's that!" the two exclaimed, almost in a word.

The Chinaman shrugged and smiled enigmatically.

"'Nother one uh yer Chink bluffs," mumbled Shorty.

"I ain't so sure," joined his partner meditatively. "But we better get movin'.



Com' on! Stick 'er where she'll be safe, Shorty. Get that shotgun. Get both them water bags. That's it—both uv 'em. It's hot an' we'll need 'em," he added with a chuckle of grim significance.

"All right," announced Shorty, lowering his gun and grinning at the Chinaman with lips that twitched. "We'll toddle on, Ole Timer. Sorry can't have yer company."

"You may need it," tranquilly replied Prince Chu, commencing deftly to pick up his scattered things. "I shall not be far behind."

The gunman laughed unpleasantly. "I guess yuh'll keep outa gun range," he retorted, backing away a few steps.

"Which way?" inquired Shorty, loaded with the appointed articles. They contemptuously turned their attention from their late victim, now that they had rendered him harmless, they thought, and disabled by lack of water.

"Wait uh minute," the Squint interjected. "Let's see the rock. I wanna look at it close."

Shorty dug the great black opal from an inner pocket and was about to hand it to the other, when he halted suspiciously.

"Yuh ain't startin' nothin', Squint, are yuh?" he inquired.

"Com' on, yuh boob," protested the other. "How could I? We're t'gether, ain't we? Ain't there enough in it fer both uv us, anyhow? I jus' wanna see how the thing feels. Gee, she's some rock!" he exulted, as Shorty released the great jewel unwillingly. He allowed his attention to be consumed by the fascinating opal for a moment, and then he slipped the stone into an inner vest pocket.

"Hey, you! Wot're yuh comin' on me?" challenged the ragged one.

"Yer pockets're apt t' have holes in 'em, Shorty—"

At this point they were interrupted by the even-toned, dispassionate voice of the Chinaman. He had stood up from his patient reassembling, and there was such a contempt, such an impalpable foreboding in his voice, that both bad-men were impressed with a vague apprehension.

"Mr. Shorty, you have made your third mistake today," came the veiled, slowly articulated words.

Then addressing them both, "You have never seen such a stone, before, have you?"

"Com' on—cut it short," interrupted the squint-eyed.

"There is only one such stone in the world," continued Prince Chu, un hastened.

"It has ruled empires for ten thousand years. Before this, thieves have stolen it; yet none have kept it long, except its rightful owners." He paused impressively.

Despite their callousness, the two thugs were getting a little nervous. Each had been speculating on the almost impossible value of the jewel. How could they dispose of it? Perhaps he was right. Maybe it wasn't intended for such as they. Still they should be able to realize something out of it.

"It has this peculiar faculty," continued the smooth, unruffled voice, "that when it falls into the hands of one who is not entitled to it, the unlawful possessor will enjoy good fortune as long as he retains it; but if he should relinquish it from his person, it becomes his fate to meet a violent death, very shortly afterward."

Prince Chu allowed himself the shadow of a smile, then his inscrutable eyes searched the faces of the ruffians to note when the significance of his clever invention should have penetrated their heat and drug crazed brains. He knew that superstition was not peculiar to his own race. It was the common penalty of all killers of men. Murder had stamped itself on the faces of these two, for such eyes as his to read, and fear now swept into the features of the one called Shorty.

"Gimme that back!" he shouted, his voice rising to a strained pitch and breaking. "Wot'd'ga have t' take it for, anyhow? Com' on, Squint, lemme have ut back," he begged.

The pasty-nosed Squint laughed sneeringly, and his lips twisted in a simulation of pity.

There came a low whine over the distant dunes. The disputing pair had not noticed that the sun's light was fading out. The air was stifling.

"Don't be uh boob," gibed Squint. And there was a crackling edge to his laugh. "The Chink's tryin' unthoer shindy on us." But his tone carried no confidence in his words. There seemed to be an insidious, occult, inexorable something about this Oriental who had communed so long with the desert.

The badgered Shorty twitched his gun hand instinctively, then discreetly checked himself.

"Yeh—yeh, damn yuh!" he wailed in



terrified anger. "Now yer scared to let go of it, yerself!"

Neither of them had noticed why their words had to be shouted. They were too wrapt in their argument to perceive that the dull whine had risen to a distinct roar.

Swiftly the Chinaman had gathered up his outfit, and he was cinching it into place on the burro. The cut-throats had taken about twenty paces from him when he had halted them with his recital of the black opal's mythical qualities. Still in verbal conflict, they moved on.

A wind puff swished over the low dunes, driving loose sand through the crackling branches of the brittle salt bush. An incessant rush of suffocating air followed. Little rivulets of sand began to lift and worm along the ground and spill over the rolling dunes. Dust cloud blanketed the desert.

Prince Chu picked up the lead rope of his abbreviated burro and commenced to plod southward, with his back to the swirling, wind-driven dust. A hundred yards ahead of him the fleeing pair were trying to take note of their position and were traveling undecided as to direction.

In the south distance, before the dust had filled the air, there had been visible the jagged outline of the San Francisco Mountains. Now nothing was visible save the immediate wind-swept surface of the earth, the troubled dunes, and the higher desert ridges. Yuen Ming Chu had no intention of letting his despoilers beyond the range of his vision. And he was obliged to shorten the intervening distance; for the hot wind rose into a hurricane.

He rapidly overtook the two wobbling, stumbling men. They were letting themselves



being swept directly with the drift of the storm, hunched over, running, scurrying up the ridges, sliding down.

They were not concerned with their pursuer's presence.

They had shorn him of harm. He looked down at them, as they picked themselves up under the leeward of a sand drift.

"You are drifting with the storm," shouted Ming Chu. "It is blowing a west angle to our course. You must walk so that it strikes first the point of the left shoulder."

"You lead out," faintly responded the authoritative one of the pair. "Move on ahead, there. We'll follow. But no damned monkey business, Chink!"

Prince Chu looked back at them as he brushed by with his burro, and he interrupted a significant exchange of glances between them. Steadily he bore ahead, and the very surface of the earth seemed to be lifting up to bear them all down into smothered oblivion. He was fully at the mercy of these plunderers who followed him six paces in the rear. He had read the meaning in the look which they had exchanged. They intended to coolly shoot him down when they had done with his guidance. The drifting sand would do the rest.

"Such as it is to be, so it shall be," meditated this silver-haired son of the Great Ancients.

They were not following him easily. The driven sand cut through their ragged clothing. Occasionally one of them fell headlong. Neither tried to assist the other. The shorter one seemed to be the sturdier of the two. The long-legged one stumbled more frequently. One or the other of them frequently called on him to wait for them. He perforce obeyed. When they were close behind him, Ming Chu could see contortions of fear at work in the pallid face of the gasping Shorty. Each time that his partner went down he registered a look of satisfaction.

Prince Chu smiled inwardly. The prospect of violent death was fermenting in Shorty's brain. His features portrayed a fixed terror born of the alleged fate dependent on his losing possession of the marvelous opal. His mind was caught in the dread that the prophesy's fulfillment was bearing down upon him.

The surface of the desert was moving, shifting; slow rollers rose and sank, and drifted on. The earth picked itself up and rushed whither the mad wind drove. Small dunes melted away, where they were not rooted down by the stunted growth. New ones swelled up before their eyes—swelled up and burst and crawled ahead. Flat rivulets of sand ran, ruffled, spumed against the rifted cholla trunks. The wild dry sea tumbled, rushed and roared on, relentless, insatiable. The three men and the beast were pounded, blasted, blown tumbling with the drift. There was no longer any tacking against its drive. The slipping sand sucked them down. Each step made a whirlpool into which they sank, straining to tear free, while the awful vol-

ume of the wind drove down upon them.

The high outline of a sand ridge loomed suddenly before them. It was an elevation which had built itself up year after year, by reason of its resistant creosote bush and other tenacious growth. It was halting the rushing flood of sand, banking it back against the terrific current. They were swept toward it. Its base seemed swelling, crawling to meet them, and its outline was mounting higher and higher. They were driven up with the piling earth. The thundering volume frayed at them, pressed the breath from their lungs, tumbled them, carried them with it. A mountain was being formed. They shot across its summit and dropped as though from a cloud. They slid and rolled and lodged under the lee of the ridge.

His face bleeding, his hands shaking, the ragged, short man stepped backward from the creeping pile and laughed. The sound made the other jump and whirl around on him. It was a sharp, strained cackle—a mad expression of release from the immediate clutches of death.

The man's pasty face was pale green and drawn into lines of pain. He cursed the laughter.

"Laugh when we get outa this," he snapped, "er that damn Chink'll get us yet." He made a threatening step toward the shorter one.

"Yer scared yer goin' t' croak, ain'tcha?" he snarled. "Yuh wanna see me croak first, don'tcha? Well, don'tcha try t' start nothin' with me! I'm uh live man yet, by God!"

The smaller man stepped backward again. The sand sucked in around his shoe-tops. He stood still a moment, and then a curious, pained, questioning look came into his face. He advanced a step, hastily, and whirled about. Looking down at the spot where he had stood, he saw two black-spotted coils, one above the other, partly buried, and a flat, fanged head protruding from the sand. He had felt three sharp stings in his half-deadened leg, before he had moved.

Almost forgotten by the battered twain, the harmless Yuen Ming Chu had also observed the mottled coils and the venomous puffed head of the diamond rattler.

On recognizing what had befallen him, the stricken man's screech mounted to the whistling roar overhead.

"Wot'sa matter? Bit—hey?" interrogated the Squint.

"I'm croakin'; now I'm croakin' sure!" gasped Shorty.

"Hey, shut up! Can the racket! Ain't the Chink got some stuff fer that? Sure he has.

"Hey, John—come through with yer snake dope. Bring it here!"

Prince Chu was standing about fifteen feet from the pair. Now he drew from his inner pocket the little flat case of medicines. Selecting the vial of white crystals, he replaced the case in his pocket and drew the cork from the bottle. Before he made any move toward the distressed Shorty, he emptied the contents of the vial into the palm of his hand. Sufficient wind yet stirred within their shelter to disturb the light pulverized stuff. So he closed his fingers over it. Holding it thus, he waited, while the flicker of a smile touched his impassive features.

The smitten Shorty caught the inkling of some subtle purpose back of the Chinaman's pause.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Wot'sa matter?"

He tried to draw his gun. It was packed solid in his pocket with sand. Frantically he dug it out, while his partner stood by, half-amused.

"No tricks, Chink! Come through with it!" he frenziedly commanded. He drew the pistol finally.

The old Chinaman maintained his distance. "Why should you shoot me?" he questioned. "If you should do that, the powder would spill from my hand and be lost in the sand."

A startled look overspread the features already terrified.

"If you come any nearer," was the mild assurance, "I will let the powder scatter."

"Hell!" articulated Shorty, deadened in his tracks.

"I will give this to you when you have returned the black opal to me," stated the scion of the Ancient Tsins.

These words acted as a spring releasing the afflicted man's action. He wheeled about to his partner.

"Now, will yuh gimme that?" he shrieked.

But a mortal terror had at last entered the face of Squint. He saw his partner dying a violent death, and he had no mind to release the uncanny stone which he was now convinced would work the same fate with him, if he should let it go. With the most desperate speed he had ever achieved in his lifetime, his hand flashed for his gun.

There followed a streak of flame and a report against the twilight and the din of the storm. The tall, squint-eyed man sank first to his knees, and then crumpled down

into the sand. Death caught the horrified expression in his red-rimmed eyes and held it until he pitched forward, face down, his right hand still wedged in his hip pocket by the sand which had prevented him from drawing the gun.

With fingers shaking out of his control, Shorty turned the limp form over and clawed into one of the inner vest pockets until he triumphantly drew forth the smoldering black opal at the end of its shimmering chain. Half-crawling, half-stumbling, he started with it for the extended hand of Yuen Ming Chu. He had dropped his short weapon behind him, and the troubled sand was crawling down over the upturned form of his victim.

He did not reach the outstretched hand, even though Prince Chu was coming to meet him. His face purpled in blotches,

his breath choked, and the grip of convulsion tore him down.

The old son of the Tsins and the Mings stooped over him for a moment and examined the purpled veins and the black, contorted features. He shook his head.

"Too late," he murmured.

And again opening his little, flat case, he extracted another vial, and from it he let a few drops of the amber liquid trickle down between the gasping lips. Soon the movements relaxed and calm wiped out the tortured lines. The sand sifted down and the moving mountain crept on.

There was as nothing where the two men had stood and fought, and enacted the latest chapter in the history of that great, black, lambent jewel; more precious even than life, outlasting death; which had ruled empires for ten thousand years.



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

THE PONY EXPRESS

ONE of the most picturesque and thrilling institutions of the Old West, now given place to train, automobile and aeroplane, was the Pony Express. All too little fiction has been written around these hardy riders and sturdy mounts, all too little recognition taken of the sterling feats of courage and endurance they performed.

We are glad to publish Earl C. McCain's story, "From One to Another," in this issue; and glad to learn that tentative plans have been made to have the government issue a limited number of the old pony express stamps for use in the pony express relay race planned as part of the Portola festival in San Francisco this year. One hundred and twenty-five horses and

twenty-five riders will take part in this race from St. Joseph, Mo., to San Francisco, following as nearly as possible the old Wells-Fargo route of the early days.

Mr. McCain, who is a Westerner himself, has investigated races of this sort, and in regard to the events of his story says, "There has never been a race of this exact type held. The nearest to it was The Denver Post Endurance Race, from Evanston, Wyo., to Denver. Twenty-three cowboys on broncos took part in this, Charles E. Workman finishing first and F. T. Wykert second, arriving neck and neck in front of *The Post* building.

"This summer an endurance contest of a different type was held at Colorado Springs. The horses were to travel sixty miles each day and return, and at the end

to be judged by condition as well as the time made. The sixty miles had to be covered in from nine to eleven hours. Twelve horses participated, the winner being Norfolk Star, a cavalry horse from Fort D. A. Russell, ridden by Captain H. E. Watkins.

"The contest continued for five days, three hundred miles, and Norfolk Star's time was 47 hours, 37 minutes. Jerry, a horse from Fort Sill, Okla., made slightly better time than Norfolk Star, but lost out by finishing in poor condition. Two cow ponies were entered in this contest, but both were eliminated early in the race. Rabbit, a three-quarter thoroughbred, finished second, and Fox, a horse of unknown breeding, owned by Ed Pringle, of Colorado Springs, beat out Jerry for third place.

"One of the old-timers here states that a contest slightly similar to the race described in my story was held back in the 60's, when the Pony Express was in operation. It is his belief that express parcels were started from St. Joseph and San Francisco at the same time, the race depending upon which reached the opposite destination first."

"EAST!"

YOU remember the scheme which we began talking about more than a year ago for boxing the compass with complete novels representative of the various points of direction? There was James B. Hendryx with "North!" which has just been published in book form at \$1.75; and there was Charles Alden Seltzer with "West!" which was published in book form at the same price last season. At that time we asked you, our readers, who should complete the four major points. H. Bedford-Jones was almost unanimously chosen as the man to write the story for "East!" We are glad to say he has done so, and a ripping piece of work it is, too. In "East!" this author, whose Chinese stories fairly breathe the mysterious atmosphere of the Orient, takes us into the interior of China with a young American engineer who sets out to solve the secret of the Mountain Paradise of which no Oriental would speak and of which the Americans and Europeans heard the wildest rumors. Even its location was a mystery. Yet it did not take this Bedford-Jones hero long to find it, nor to solve the puzzle as to the identity of the goddess Si-wu who was reputed to reign over this ideal kingdom. The story, replete with action and adventure, leads the issue for next month.

Of the major points in the compass, it only remains now for some one of the best writers to give us "South!" Who shall it be? What sort of story do you suggest to complete the swing around the circle?

Robert Pinkerton will be with us again, in the next number, with "Downstream," a novelette of the Canadian bush country. And E. S. Pladwell, a newcomer for *SHORT STORIES*, will be on hand with a realistic and engaging Western novelette.

Among the short story men will be Edwin Hunt Hoover with another story of Dutch and Blue Danube—of how Dutch sang cowboy songs to a fetching young lady, and played detective—and how they all danced to the tune of the tenderfoot who "looked like a wise old bronc"; Robert S. Lemmon, back with another of "John Mather's adventures in Ecuador, this time among the Jivaro head-hunters; Herbert Louis McNary with one of those railroad telegraph stories many of you have been asking for—only this tale will be equally enjoyable to those who haven't the slightest interest in railroad or telegraph affairs.

READING UNDER DIFFICULTIES

SHORT STORIES travels to some queer corners of the earth and is read under trying conditions, but it seems that Major Altizer's experience wins hands down:

Editor, *SHORT STORIES*,
Dear Sir:

I have long intended to send you a testimonial of my enjoyment of *SHORT STORIES*. I have been reading the magazine for years, and I must confess that it does not fail to hold my interest. The style of stories you use can certainly be nothing else than beneficial to those who enjoy a life of out-doors and adventure.

There are numbers of your stories which recall to me times I spent right at the scene where the plot is laid, perhaps one of the reasons why I enjoy *SHORT STORIES*. I think one of my greatest disappointments was during the Great War. As you know, magazines were then prohibited from being sent by individuals to the soldiers in France. But I had a plan to overcome that. A friend back home would pick out the best stories, cut them from the covers, and mail them to me in letters. It happened that I had to spend several days and nights in a particularly exposed observation post, a letter had just been sent to me which contained a story from *SHORT STORIES*. Several hours later I was trying to read it, when, Wham! along came a high explosive and the debris entirely buried my short story, for I took the usual "duck" without consideration for anything else.

With best wishes for the continued success of your magazine, I am,

MAJOR C. S. ALTIZER,
Cambria,

Danford G. Britton, author of "North Wind's Message," in this issue, is another who has run across **SHORT STORIES** in an out-of-the-way corner. In this case the wandering copy of the magazine was the gem from which Mr. Britton's fine poem sprang. As he tells it:

Something over two years ago I made one of my annual outing trips up into Canada. We were delayed in making our return journey by a real old blizzard and were holed up in our cabin for about three weeks.

The cabin had evidently been built for some time and among other odds and ends it contained an old copy of **SHORT STORIES**. I read the magazine through several times and one short article or verse on the North interested me especially. As there was nothing to do except tend fires, to pass away the time, I tried my hand at a little verse of my own. A few days ago in going through my camping togs I came across it.

Have you encountered **SHORT STORIES** under unusual circumstances? If so, let us hear about it; the members of the Circle are no doubt interested in hearing of the queer adventures and experiences of the magazine—many of them no doubt more startling than anything that ever gets between its covers.

THE MAIL BAG

SO MANY interesting letters are arriving from members of the **CIRCLE** lately, that it is a temptation to crowd everything else out to give them room. The more the merrier—and the better for **SHORT STORIES**—so keep right on sending them.

Here is one from a former South African, who will be pleased to know that there

are several more of Greene's "Major" stories on the press right now:

Editor, **SHORT STORIES**,

I am a South African by birth, having been born in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the time Oom Paul Kruger ran the Transvaal Republic. Have been in America about twelve years and am proud to say that I am an American citizen; nevertheless, I have the kindest thoughts and remembrances of my native land and I certainly enjoy the "Major" stories. They are well written and the author must know his South Africa, which is a good field for good stories.

THEO. BEHR,

THE READERS' CHOICE COUPON

THE Readers' Choice Coupons are beginning to flow in; keep it up! Cut out the coupon below, fill it out with the names of the stories in this issue that pleased you, and let us have it. It is your chance to get the kind of stories you want.

Chas. A. Beck was the first to send in his Coupon, and the good letter he sent with it is worth printing:

"Readers' Choice" Editor, **SHORT STORIES**:

As far as I am concerned you'll have to wait a few more issues in order to get my opinion of who writes the best stories. Just as I said on the Coupon *all* of the stories in the _____ issue of **SHORT STORIES** are fine and dandy. I know what I am talking about for I am a reader of about ten different adventure and short story magazines and the stories in your March 25th issue are some of the best I ever read. I have read **SHORT STORIES** for the last seven years and I never read a bum story yet.

CHARLES A. BECK,

What is your opinion of this issue?

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, **SHORT STORIES**:

World's Work (1913), Ltd., 20 Bedford St., London, W.C. 2.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

- 1 _____ 3 _____
 2 _____ 4 _____
 5 _____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

A Selection of Popular Titles from
HEINEMANN'S THREE & SIXPENNY LIBRARY

Robert Hichens	<i>Bella Donna</i>
Jack London	<i>Martin Eden</i>
Joseph Conrad	<i>Typhoon & three other Stories</i> <i>The Nigger of the Narcissus</i>
W. Somerset Maugham	<i>The Moon & Sixpence</i>
The author of "Pam"	<i>Yellowleaf</i>
Richard Dehan	<i>The Dop Doctor</i> <i>That Which Hath Wings</i> <i>Between Two Thieves</i> <i>The Man of Iron</i> <i>The Eve of Pasqua</i>
Frances Hodgson Burnett	<i>The Shuttle</i>
Maurice Hewlett	<i>The Fool Errant</i> <i>The Little Iliad</i>
Marie Conway Oemler	<i>The Butterfly Man</i> <i>A Woman Named Smith</i> <i>The Purple Heights</i>
E. F. Benson	<i>Account Rendered</i> <i>Mammon & Co.</i> <i>Juggernaut</i>
Sarah Grand	<i>Adnam's Orchard</i>
Flora Annie Steel	<i>The Gift of the Gods</i> <i>A Sovereign Remedy</i>



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Short Stories

Twice-a-Month

THE NEXT NUMBER

EAST!

A complete novel, wherein a young American, breathing the spirit of action, of the West, meets a secret of the ever mysterious Orient, and realises his desire for high adventure.

H. BEDFORD-JONES

and in the same Number

DOWNSTREAM

A novelette of the North, and of the forces abroad in the mighty stretches—were they caused by the mind of man, or by the gods of the Indians?

ROBERT E. PINKERTON

THE HIGH TRAIL

A grave choice confronted Rob Macdonald, lately come to the cattle-country. The high trail was the hardest to follow, but counted most in the end among the barons of the ranges.

E. S. PLADWELL

THE HEAD HUNTERS

John Mather, Naturalist, to whom adventures were all in the day's work, meets a fellow scientist not so lucky as himself.

ROBERT S. LEMMON

AND OTHERS
