NOVEMBER-1913

TWICE-A-MONTH

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Top-Notch Magazine

The Turquoise Owl

by Roland Ashford Phillips

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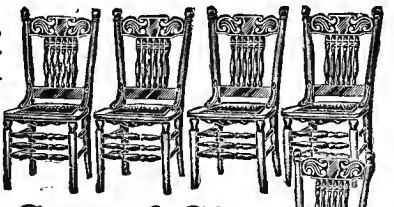

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November CONTENTS 1913

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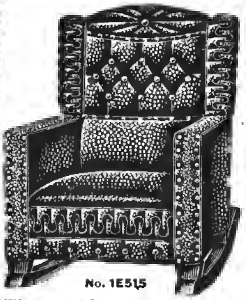

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Women's Stories

Mary Roberts Rinehart
Mary Cholmondeley
Herman Whitaker
Edmund Fredericks
Helen Green Van Campen
Margarita Spalding Gerry
Richard Washburn Child
Henry Kitchell Webster
Alfred Noyes
Anne O'Hagan

On October 7, the first number of the news stands. It is a fiction of to-day. It contains the work of

Cholmondeley

MARY CHOLMONDELEY is perhaps the greatest woman novelist living. Since the publication of "Red Pottage" her place has been assured. A new book from her is an event. The first installment of her latest serial is in the first issue of WOMEN'S STORIES. "After All" is the name of the novel. It is the big, dramatic, throbbing life-story of one woman, beset with temptations, of her brave and apparently hopeless struggle to realize her ideals, of a thrilling and finally triumphant fight against the forces of depravity and darkness. It is a great book, Mary Cholmondeley's greatest. It will be completed in three issues of WOMEN'S STORIES.

Van Campen

HELEN VAN CAMPEN. There is no one who can describe so well, with such a light and sure touch, with such wit and charm, the life of those who flutter about and beneath the white lights of Broadway. Perhaps you have met her witty telephone girls and her wise bell boys. They are moths who are not singed by the flame. You'll meet them again in a new series of stories, the first of which appears in the first issue of WOMEN'S STORIES.

Illustration from Anne O'Hagan's Story.

Whitaker

HERMAN WHITAKER is known wherever fiction is read. His descriptions of Mexican life, his instinctive knowledge of feminine psychology, his force and dramatic power, have put him in a class by himself. You will find him at his best in the story he contributes to the first number of the new magazine. The theme of "His Neighbor's Wife" handled by some writers might be objectionable—but not as Whitaker writes it. The story rings sound and true in spite of the fact that it is vivid, vital and dramatic.

Child

RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD is one of the most promising of the newer generation of AMERICAN novelists. He is also one of the very few writers whose short stories are big enough to warrant a collection of them being printed in cloth covers. His story, "Sisters Under their Skins," which appears in the first issue of WOMEN'S STORIES, is one of the best he has written. It is a story for women and about women—two of them, one rich and one poor, and how each faced the problem of a faithless husband and helped each other to do it.

WOMEN'S STORIES appears on magazine for the intelligent woman greatest living writers and illustrators

Rinehart

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART is so well known as to make a description of her work unnecessary. She has that rare combination—a gift of humor, and the ability to write a gripping and absorbing tale of mystery. One of her short stories will appear in the first issue of WOMEN'S STORIES.

O'Hagan

ANNE O'HAGAN. Sane, sound, refreshing—these are adjectives that well describe the work of ANNE O'HAGAN. Everything she writes bears the stamp of distinction and has in it a stirring breath of sane and womanly optimism. "The Turning Point," her latest story, in two parts, will start in the first issue of WOMEN'S STORIES. No girl, no woman can read it without feeling that she has gained a deeper insight into the mystery of life, without feeling herself uplifted and purified by its nobility and pathos. Throughout the narrative we feel the feminine charm and appeal of Theresa, the heroine, and learn to know her as one of our own friends. It is a great story and, above all, a great "woman's story."

Gerry

MARGARITA SPALDING GERRY is another American writer whose stories rank as literature. "As Caesar's Wife" and "The Toy Shop" were great novels, but the finest work of this author is still to come and will appear in WOMEN'S STORIES. You will find a short story of hers in the first issue, and later on WOMEN'S STORIES will publish her serial, "The Masks of Love."

Noyes

ALFRED NOYES, the poet, is also a contributor to the first number of the magazine. More of his verse will appear in later issues. Noyes is the most promising and prominent writer of English verse to-day. In the opinion of many he should be poet laureate.

Stone

JANE STONE is a newcomer as a writer of stories, although she is well known as a collaborator with the late David Graham Phillips. Her first long story, which will later appear in book form, appears complete in the first issue of WOMEN'S STORIES. It is called "The New Sort of Man," and is a thrilling drama as well as a fearless and vital discussion of a big question.

"The Turning Point," in WOMEN'S STORIES.

Women's Stories

Originality

THIS is unlike any other woman's magazine in the world. It represents the warmly feminine rather than the flaccid effeminate. It is all fiction and all the stories are of a vital real type. It stands for truth in the delineation of life and makes its special appeal to the intelligent woman of to-day. Its appeal is not passive but active. It is something you will really want.

Sincerity

IF sincerity, honesty of purpose and a sound belief in a bigger and better future for women as well as for men appeal to you, you will like the magazine. You will find it throws the door open to a big new field of thought and interest.

Breadth

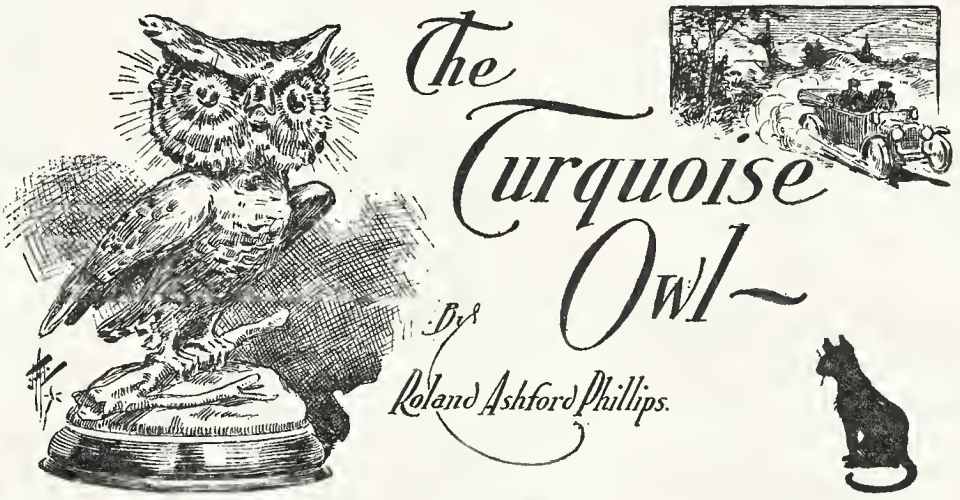
WE believe that the whole of life is just as much woman's province as it is man's and if you agree with us, WOMEN'S STORIES is *your* magazine. On the preceding pages you will find mention of a few of the stories in the first issue. This is only a fair indication of what you may expect in the future.

The first number appears on the news stands October 7th. It costs fifteen cents. Buy it to-day and see.

Illustration from Helen Van Campen's story in the first issue.

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

VOL. XIV NOVEMBER 1, 1913 No. 3



The Turquoise Owl—

By Roland Ashford Phillips.

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

THE TREASURE OF T'ANG.

A MOTOR car, white with alkali dust, swung between the high gateposts, rolled up the gravel path, and came to a stop beside the covered porch of the Truxton ranch house. The wealthy cattleman sprang from the seat, called one of his men to take charge of the car, and went into the house.

Chee Sam, the Chinese cook, who filled the position of butler as well when there were no guests at the ranch, ceased his unmusical humming and flattened himself, in a shadowy recess of the kitchen wall. From this point of vantage he watched Mr. Truxton with furtive eyes. When the ranchman was moving down the hall, Chee Sam, forgetful of his duties in the kitchen, followed, slipping from wall to wall, and from door to door, like a cat stalking a bird. His face darkened suddenly as the library door closed behind the cattleman. He stopped and looked behind him, as if undecided whether to follow or not. Then, as he stepped forward, preparatory to kneeling at the keyhole, a girl's voice arrested him.

"What are you doing here, Sam?"

Alicia Truxton stood in the doorway of an adjoining room. She was slim, lithe, dark-haired, tanned with the sun of twenty summers. She came down the hall in long, easy strides that bespoke a life in the open, her level, brown eyes fixed upon the placid face of the Oriental.

"What are you doing here, Sam?" she repeated. "Were you called?"

Chee Sam faced her with an inscrutable smile. Whatever passed in his mind was not reflected in his sallow, masklike countenance.

"Mr. Tluxton—he give orders for dinner? Company, maybe?"

"No, there will be no company for dinner," Miss Truxton answered sharply. "And you know perfectly well, Sam, that my father is not in the habit of giving orders. I have always attended to that. What is the matter with you? You're never in the kitchen, where you belong; I've come upon you tiptoeing through the halls, and hiding back of portières, and apparently listening at keyholes. You're enough to give one the creeps. If you don't behave I'll have father dismiss you."

She watched as Chee Sam bowed submissively and padded down the hall, his loose blouse fluttering. When he had disappeared she opened the library door and closed it softly behind her.

Under the dim light of a mullioned window, Alicia saw her father examining one of his recently gained treasures—an absurd china owl of turquoise hue, with a head several times too big for its body. Mr. Truxton turned the image lovingly in his fingers, so that the light reflected from the dull underglaze, all unconscious of his daughter's presence.

The ranchman was a slight, wiry man, his face wrinkled and weather-beaten, his hair scanty and gray. In this room, surrounded by the prizes he had collected with his own hands, or bargained for with shrewd dealers in every part of the world, Truxton spent most of his time. There were those of his neighbors and friends who marveled that a man of his kind—a born and bred Westerner, and owner of the greatest cattle ranch in Wyoming—should interest himself with such "nonsense." But Truxton did not bother himself to explain; there was little use in discussing porcelain with a neighbor who thought twenty dollars was too much to pay for a hundred-piece dinner set, when he had given a thousand dollars for a single gem of a Baluster plate.

"Father," Alicia said gently.

The ranchman lifted his head, almost startled, peering across the room, one hand covering his treasure.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"You promised me the runabout for this afternoon," she said. "Have you forgotten?"

"I don't recall any promise," he answered.

"Oh, dear!" she said reproachfully. "I told you over a week ago that I had entered in the tennis tournament at Fort Russell. It is to be played off this afternoon at three." She consulted her watch. "It's after two o'clock now."

"Welch has the small car," Mr. Truxton said. "He's up with the branders. I don't know how soon he'll be back."

"Can't you get him by phone?"

"He's overseeing the branding job," Truxton explained, "and I don't want to interrupt. Your tennis game isn't so important."

"It really is important!" she declared. "I told you it was to be a match game. Mr. Osborne will be expecting me——"

"Glad you mentioned that young man," the father broke in. "I meant to bring up the subject before. I've found out something about Mr. Osborne."

"Unfavorable?" she asked, seating herself in the nearest chair.

"In a way, yes." Mr. Truxton caressed the image that lay under his fingers. "I—I don't want him to come here any more," he added.

The girl looked up in astonishment, unable to believe that her father spoke seriously. "Why, father! You can't mean that! Mr. Osborne is the most interesting young man I have met. Why have you so suddenly decided against him? Only last week, when he was here to dinner, you said he——"

"What I said last week must be forgotten," Mr. Truxton broke in gravely. "I was too hasty in my judgment."

"But what is there against him?" she asked. "Surely I have a right to know."

The old man took up the owl, bestowed upon it a final, loving glance,

wrapped it carefully in a square of cloth, and placed it on the lower shelf of an old-fashioned safe that had been built under the window seat. After this he turned toward his daughter.

"Please don't ask him here again, Alicia," he said quietly. "I don't want to be hard on you, dear. You have other friends—other attractive young men who are always welcome here. I'll explain later."

"But—but I can't understand," she demurred, her brown eyes clouding. "I thought because Mr. Osborne was a collector, and interested in the collecting of porcelain, that you would enjoy his company."

"So I did, at first." Mr. Truxton came over to where his daughter was sitting, and took both her hands in his own. "You mustn't be angry with me. I have never asked you to do anything unreasonable—that wasn't for your own good." He smiled and patted her hands. "You'll do this for me, won't you? Maybe I won't be giving orders much longer; I'm getting old."

"Nonsense, father!" the girl protested.

"No more trips abroad," he continued; "no more adventures, no more bargaining, no more excitement. But I can't complain; I've found what I wanted." His eyes lighted up as they always did when he was on the subject so near and dear to his heart. "The owl is mine. The priceless turquoise owl that T'ang worshiped. That's something to be proud of, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Alicia answered. "It's wonderful—and I'm glad because you are. If I wasn't so dull I might be able to realize all its possession means to you."

A knock sounded on the door, startling both father and daughter. Alicia answered it. One of the punchers, hat in hand, stood in the hall. "Is Mr. Truxton here?" he inquired.

"Hello! What's wanted?" The ranch owner stepped forward.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," the other began apologetically, "but there's more trouble down at the bunk houses. I guess you'd better come and attend to it."

Truxton's eyes flamed with sudden anger. "I'll go right along with you, Reed. I'll settle this affair at once. Those new boys can't stay on my ranch if they don't behave."

He strode out of the library and down the hall, followed by the puncher. Alicia watched them until they disappeared, then turned and walked into an adjoining room which was separated from the library by heavy, gold-shot curtains.

This room looked out upon a wide, cement-floored, vine-sheltered porch, where breakfast was often served, and evening dinner, too, when the weather permitted. The low windows commanded a view of the snakelike road that wound over barren Sherman Hill on its way to Cheyenne and the East. As the girl stood there, her eyes upon the brow of the distant hill, puzzled at her father's speech, and at his sudden dislike for Mr. Osborne, a car shot into view, topping the hill, followed by the inevitable cloud of whitish dust. It dipped into the hollow, then reappeared, and at last drew up at the rear gate.

A smiling, sunburned young man stood up in the seat and waved his hand. Alicia slipped out upon the porch and called to him. It was Osborne. He got out of the car and came across the lawn, vaulting the low, boxwood hedge, and stepping over the irrigating ditch that ran beside it.

"Hello!" he said gayly. "You're a great sport, Miss Truxton! Going to back out? The first games have been started. I was commanded to bring you to the courts."

She explained about the car. "Father wouldn't allow a tennis game to interfere with his branding. I was just preparing to saddle a pony," she added.

"I thought there was something in the wind," he said, coming up on the porch, "so I borrowed Hilton's car. Come; the doubles are on now. They've postponed the singles until you come." His eyes sparkled. "The stands are packed. I've never seen such a wonderful crowd. It's a pretty smart af-

fair—and to think we're in the heart of the West. There are two Indians in the crowd, and they're attracting more attention than they would in New York."

"You'll have to wait a minute," she told him. "I'm going to take another racket. Come in and sit down. There are some books that will interest you." She nodded toward a low shelf.

"Jove!" said Osborne. He had picked up a color plate. The girl paused at the curtains and looked back to see what had caused the exclamation. Then she laughed.

"Do you like that?" It was a print of a blue-and-white cat. "It's almost as funny as a turquoise owl. Have you ever seen one?"

He looked up from the plate and smiled. "I haven't sampled enough Cheyenne whisky to reach that stage," he replied.

"Oh, I mean a porcelain owl," she explained.

"Porcelain?" he repeated sharply, suddenly serious.

"Yes, a turquoise owl. It's the most absurd creature you ever saw. I wonder if you are as crazy over these things as father seems to be? He picked up this owl in China—found a coolie boy playing with it in the street of some inland town. I really thought he had gone insane at first." The recollection of that day brought a smile to her lips. She rattled on, forgetful of her father's parting injunction: "But I'm of the opinion that the owl is worthless—that it was 'planted' there by a clever dealer, who knew father wanted it. The merchants were forever trying to swindle us. Father had to pay a hundred dollars for it."

Osborne had dropped the color plate, and was staring at the girl with wide, incredulous eyes.

"You mean—that your father picked up a turquoise owl—in China?" he asked. His voice was so different, so strangely pitched, that the girl laughed.

"That's just what I said. I begged father not to give the man so much money, but he wouldn't listen."

"And he has this owl—here?" continued Osborne.

She nodded.

"I'll be your friend for life, Miss Truxton, if you'll show it to me."

"I'd like to," she said. "Maybe you would know whether it was genuine or not. But you see, father thinks so much of it that he keeps it in the safe—never lets it out of his sight. And I don't know the combination of the safe." She stopped suddenly. "Oh, wait! Maybe we're in luck! I saw him put the owl in the safe five minutes ago, and I don't think he closed the door."

She darted through the curtains, to reappear a minute later with the image wrapped in the cloth. She removed the covering and held the grotesque figure on the palm of her hand.

"Behold!" she cried, in mock seriousness. "The booby prize! What is your verdict?"

CHAPTER II.

THE OWL'S FLIGHT.

OSBORNE took the porcelain bird. His hands were trembling. For a moment he seemed dazed, stricken dumb. "Great Scott!" he exclaimed at last. "It's a—a T'ang piece. Yes, yes, it must be. I never knew such a beauty existed." He held it up to the light, stepping nearer the window. "What modeling! What exquisite underglaze!"

The figure was about six inches high. The wings were slightly extended, as if the bird were poised for flight. The head was thrust forward, the short, hooked beak open. The whole of the body was of a beautiful turquoise glaze, the high lights shaded with paler blue. The shadows under the body and under the wings were a dull sea-green. The heavy-lidded eyes, half opened, were of some rough stone, set in, probably, after the image had received its baking, and resembled bits of smoky crystal. It was only when the light fell upon them at a certain angle that they flashed back a brilliant, opalescent fire. The stubby legs, perfectly shaped, and

the beak as well, were of a chrome yellow, shading into burnt umber. The bird stood upon a heavy base.

Alicia regarded Osborne with an amused and curious interest. "You are as bad as father," she said. "Is it as wonderful as that?"

"Wonderful doesn't half express it," Osborne murmured rapturously. "I have never seen its equal. It is the rarest of rare pieces. There isn't another bit of porcelain of the T'ang dynasty in existence—not even in the British Museum—none that collectors are aware of, at least. This has probably been buried for unnumbered centuries. How it has been protected from earthy incrustations is a mystery to me."

"And it is worth a hundred dollars?" the girl ventured to ask.

"If it were mine," Osborne replied calmly, "I wouldn't part with it for ten thousand dollars. Why," he added, "there's absolutely no limit to what a wealthy collector would pay for it. And at speculative Fifth Avenue prices——" He pursed his lips, calculating.

"Ten thousand dollars!" echoed the amazed and incredulous girl. "Why, it isn't even ivory or bronze. It's just ordinary baked clay, like the dishes you see in the department stores."

"Baked clay!" Osborne broke out half indignantly. "I'm astonished, Miss Truxton. Baked clay, indeed! Of course it is, but the value lies in the glaze and the color. No modern workman ever turned out a gem like this—and they never will. And these eyes are rough diamonds—not so remarkably white, perhaps, but the two are very valuable. I never heard of combining porcelain and precious stones, but here is the proof. And the piece is all the more valuable because of it."

He fingered the turquoise owl gently, studying the color and the glaze with the loving eyes of a connoisseur. He brought a magnifying glass from his pocket, and examined the base of the figure for marks.

"Father said it was to be the final piece in his collection," the girl said, after a pause. "I never saw him so interested, so completely wrapped up in any curio before. If anything happened to this owl—if it were lost——"

"Sounded like some one closing a door," Osborne answered, too absorbed in the porcelain to pay much attention to other things.

A quick suspicion darted into the girl's mind. She turned and crossed the floor. Reaching the heavy curtains that shut off the library, she peered cautiously between them. One glance confirmed her fears. She went back to where Osborne stood.

"It's father! And he has closed the door of the safe!"

Osborne turned from the image and looked into her frightened face.

"Why, what's the matter, Miss Truxton?"

"Don't you understand?" she cried, holding to his arm. "Father closed the safe door and locked it. He did not look to see if the—the owl was in the safe. Now he has gone and——"

"You must call him back," he interrupted quietly, sharing none of her apparent concern.

"I can't do that," she went on. "I can't; father mustn't know that I have shown the owl to you. He mustn't know I took it out."

Her increasing agitation began to make an impression upon the collector. Still he did not understand. "Surely your father trusts you, Miss Truxton," he said. "Surely there has been no harm in showing this image to me. Why, I am partly to blame; I asked you to do it. Call your father and I will explain to him."

"No, no, no," she protested. "We must put the owl back. He must not know it has left the safe. I don't know what would happen if he opened the safe and found the owl missing."

Osborne was on the point of arguing further when footsteps sounded on the porch outside. The girl drew a sharp breath. The collector had presence of mind enough to drop the owl into his coat pocket, and pick up a book. Mr. Truxton appeared in the open doorway.

At the sight of Osborne the ranchman nodded.

"I'm called to Cheyenne, Alicia," he said, addressing his daughter. "I may be detained until late. Will you tell Sam to keep something warm for me?"

"Of course I will," the girl replied. She stepped out and put her arms about the old man. "I won't need the runabout, after all. Mr. Osborne has called for me." She kissed him. "Now take good care of yourself."

Mr. Truxton smiled. "I'll keep a sharp watch for Indians," he said. "I would hate to lose my scalp now—after all these years."

"I saw two redskins at the fort," Mr. Osborne observed.

"Is that so? I'll drop around that way and look them over. Haven't seen one since the last wild West show passed through here."

"They don't look particularly dangerous."

The ranchman's smile faded. "No; things have changed since I came to this country. It's the white men who need watching now. By the way," he added, looking straight into Osborne's eyes, "you won't find Wyoming as interesting as China."

"I've found it far more interesting," Osborne replied.

"There are things that happen in China—in Hankau for instance—that could never happen here," continued Truxton.

Osborne started involuntarily, but he controlled himself and broke into a laugh. "Quite right, Mr. Truxton. I agree with you."

"You never told me you were in Hankau," remarked the girl. "Why, that's where father——" She checked herself and deftly turned the subject. "I should think Wyoming would be far more pleasant than those stuffy Chinese towns."

"It all depends upon the man's errand," said the ranch owner, flashing a significant glance toward his daughter.

"Well," Osborne responded, "I've left all my cares and troubles in New York, and I'm out in the West for a glorious vacation. I'm going to forget business for three months."

Mr. Truxton did not respond, but there were certain grim lines about his lips that Alicia had never noticed before. It was as if this conversation had recalled memories to his mind—unpleasant ones. The three stood in silence, each waiting for another to speak. Osborne caught the look on the ranchman's face, and unconsciously his fingers went down to the bulge in his coat pocket where the turquoise owl was hidden. The girl saw the movement, and, fearing that he was on the point of explaining the situation, broke into speech.

"Do all Easterners have the same impression of the West that you had, Mr. Osborne?" she asked. "I remember how amazed you were to find us living as conventionally and unromantically as New Yorkers."

At that moment Chee Sam poked his head out through the kitchen window and informed his employer that the "allamobile" was waiting. Alicia watched her father disappear without a word. A minute later the big gray car was seen shooting through the gate and on up the hill, where it was soon lost in a veil of dust.

"Well, we're in for it now!" she exclaimed, turning to Osborne.

"You should have given me the opportunity to explain," he argued, looking after the car with troubled eyes.

"It was too late, then," she answered. "If father had not seen you here, it might have been different. As it is—well, he'll know I took the owl to show to you."

"Why will he?"

"He knows now that he left the safe door open," she went on to explain. "He knows that you must have arrived just after he left, and that you have been with me all the time. Do you suppose if I was to give back the owl, tonight, after he returns, that he wouldn't suspect the truth? I should not have shown it to you; I ought to have known better."

A sudden change came over Osborne. The mention of Hankau had started it.

He realized now why it would not do to let Mr. Truxton know that he had viewed the precious bit of turquoise porcelain. Explanations—at the present, at least—would be useless; in fact, they might lead to serious complications.

"You're right, Miss Truxton," he said at last; "your father must not know."

"What's to be done?"

"We've got to open the safe and put the owl back," he announced.

"That's easy enough to say," she returned, "but how is it to be accomplished? We can't pass the owl through a steel door, and we can't open the door."

"How about the combination?"

"Father keeps that to himself."

Osborne took out his watch. "It's three o'clock now. We'll have to postpone our tennis match. Phone them, can't you? Make any excuse. Your father won't be back until eight at the earliest, will he? That will give us five hours to do the work."

"Do the work?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Where's the safe?"

She led the way through the curtains and into the dimly lighted library. Osborne at once knelt before the old-fashioned iron safe that was built under the window seat. He gave the handle a twist.

"It's locked, all right," he observed. Then, after a more deliberate examination, added: "How long has your father had this?"

"Ever since I can remember," the girl answered.

"Thought so. Looks like the sort they built in the seventies."

While Alicia phoned over to the fort, Osborne studied the situation. The prospects were not encouraging.

"Isn't there a chance that the combination is among your father's papers?" he asked finally, as she hung up the receiver after making her excuses.

"None whatever," she responded, with a positive shake of her head. "Besides, father is in the habit of changing the combination every month or two."

"The manufacturer of the safe!" Osborne said suddenly.

"How will that help us?"

"They can open it, of course. These big manufacturers have a staff of experts who are prepared to open any safe that goes wrong." He bent down and studied some small gold lettering on the lower part of the door. The gold leaf had peeled off in many places, and it was only after a considerable effort that Osborne made out the words.

"'The Merrill Safe Company,'" he read slowly. "'Chicago and New York City.'"

The girl laughed. "Going to send to Chicago or New York for an expert?" she asked banteringly.

"Of course not. A company like this must have branch offices in the West. Undoubtedly there is a representative right here in Cheyenne. Let's look through the phone book."

Taking the directory from the hook he skimmed through the pages. "Merrill, Merrill," he repeated to himself, as he reached the right column. "Merrill Ranch, Merrill Grocery Company, Merrill & Son, dealers in hides——" He frowned and closed the book. "They're not in here. Have you a Denver phone book?" he asked finally.

"I think so," responded the girl. "Father did have one in his room. I'll look."

She hurried into the hall and up the stairs. Alone in the room, Osborne brought the owl from his pocket and turned it slowly in his fingers.

"A genuine T'ang piece," he murmured. "It's worth fifteen thousand if it's worth a penny. And to think of it being here—in Wyoming—of all places in the world. If it belonged to me——"

He drew a long breath. Here was temptation staring him in the face. He had scoured China in search of this very bit of porcelain. Twice he had risked his life following a faint and fruitless clew. He had been set upon by Chinese brigands, robbed, and left for dead in some nameless, miserable inland village. He had tramped for days over all but impassable roads, had fought the fever; he had ridden in jolt-

ing mule litters through endless wastes, in constant fear of his guides, in fear of the stagnant water they gave him to drink. He had found valuable porcelains, to be sure, and rare bronze images; but never had he laid eyes upon a T'ang owl. Imitations he had found—a score of them; but they were too crude to fool him. And now, after all this, he was holding the precious bird in his hands. This bit of "baked clay," as Alicia had called it, would create an instant furor among antiquarians, once its presence had been made known. Small wonder, then, that for his own peace of mind Mr. Truxton wanted to keep his find a secret.

CHAPTER III.

THE ONE WAY OUT.

OSBORNE wiped his damp forehead. "What a position to be placed it!" he thought, recalling the ranchman's remark about Hankau. He wondered why Mr. Truxton had mentioned that town in China. Did he know of the unpleasant affair in High Tan Street? Had he believed the gossip of the town?

A faint stirring of the heavy portières snapped his train of thought. Was some one behind them? Had some one been watching him? It couldn't be Miss Truxton, he knew. Possibly it was a servant, or, perhaps, the ranch owner had returned unexpectedly. This last possibility was enough to send the cold chills racing up and down his spine. He imagined the result if Mr. Truxton entered the library and found him kneeling in front of the safe—with the turquoise owl in his hands!

He slipped the owl back into his pocket as Alicia appeared in the doorway. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied, with a half-hearted laugh. He walked over to the curtains and jerked them back. The other room was empty. He drew a relieved breath. "Must have been the wind," he said, speaking aloud.

"What was the wind?" asked the girl, puzzled at his actions.

"Why, I was taking another look at the owl, when I saw the curtains moving," he explained. "I imagined some one was behind them."

"There's no one around the house, except Sam," she said. "I hardly think he would be interested in porcelain."

"Of course not. It was just my imagination. Did you find the directory?"

She handed him the book she brought from her father's room. "It's an old one, but I guess it will do."

Osborne took the directory and ran through the list of "M's."

"Ah, here we are!" he cried, planting a finger under the name. "The Merrill Safe Company, Cooper Building. Phone Gallup six thousand. We'll get them on long distance."

After considerable delay and several false alarms the Denver connection was made. A faint "Hello!" greeted him.

"Merrill Safe Company?" Osborne asked.

"Yes, sir."

"This is Mr. Truxton's residence, Truxton Ranch, near Cheyenne," Osborne explained carefully. "We have one of your safes. It's balky. Can't get it open. Have you an expert in Cheyenne who can help us out?"

"I believe so," came the gratifying response. "Hold the wire a moment, please."

Osborne chuckled as he turned to the girl. "Just as I told you; we'll have the safe open in an hour."

"If we get the owl back without father knowing it, I'll never touch the thing again!" she declared.

Osborne turned back to the phone once more. A man's voice greeted him now. "Hello! This is the Denver manager speaking. Our Cheyenne representative is on a vacation—fishing, I believe."

"Fishing?" echoed Osborne disgustedly. "Isn't there any one near here who can attend to the safe?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Can you send us a man from Denver?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Right away?"

"Within an hour. The next train leaves here at——"

The rest of the sentence was lost in a snarl and buzz; then the wire went dead. Osborne worked the hook up and down. "Hello! What's happened? Don't cut us off, central."

There was no response. He waited, with the receiver tight against his ear. Then a strange, feminine voice came over the wire.

"Hello," it said sweetly. "Were you speaking with Denver?"

"Yes, I was. Why did you cut me off? Is that you, central?"

"Yes, this is central. I'm very sorry. Denver doesn't answer. I think the wire's out of commission. Shall I ring you when we get your party again?"

"I wish you would, please."

Osborne hung up the receiver. "Here's a pretty mess. If that Denver line isn't working inside of an hour we're up a stump."

While Osborne had been talking over the phone, Alicia had suddenly called to mind a difficulty that had been overlooked in the excitement.

"Were you going to have this man come on from Denver?" she asked.

"What else is left for us to do?"

"But he wouldn't get here before father arrived," she argued.

"Why not? Aren't the trains running?"

"Yes; but it's a three-hour ride from Denver to Cheyenne."

"Three hours!" Osborned exclaimed. "Great Scott! I thought Denver was about fifty miles from here."

"It's over a hundred," she said. "Besides, the next train leaves there at six and arrives here at nine."

This announcement changed the complexion of the whole affair. Osborne's hopes went tumbling. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and walked up and down the library. Huddled in a big armchair, Alicia watched him with apprehensive eyes and waited for him to make another suggestion.

"Well," she said at last, as he made no effort to speak, "I suppose we might as well give up. I'll confess the whole thing to father, and take the consequences."

It seemed a bitter pill to swallow. Most of all it would mean good-by to Mr. Osborne. Her father would never listen to any argument in the man's favor, once he learned of this affair. That she had shown him the turquoise owl to satisfy herself of its genuineness would carry little weight with the antiquarian.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," protested Osborne, planting himself determinedly in front of the girl. "I got you into this mess, and I'm going to get you out of it. It was all my fault."

He did not intend that Truxton should even suspect that he had seen the porcelain, for reasons which he did not explain to the girl; such a predicament was not to be thought of. "We haven't lost yet," he told her. "It's only half past three."

He turned and looked out through the low library windows at the green hedges, at the barren plains beyond, and away to the shimmering horizon where the heat waves were dancing. Suddenly he faced the girl. "How are the roads between here and Denver?" he asked. There was something in his voice that caused the girl to sit up straight in her chair.

"The best roads in the West," she said. "They're as smooth as glass."

"Shorter than the railroad?"

"Yes, by thirty miles." She was upon her feet now. "Why—you are not thinking of——"

"You bet I am," he said. "Denver is a hundred and twenty miles from Cheyenne. This ranch is ten miles nearer Denver. That makes a hundred and ten miles. If I can't make it in two hours, Hilton's car isn't worth what he paid for it."

"But you'll not be allowed to go at that rate," she protested.

"Won't I?" He laughed and consulted his watch once more. "It's three-thirty. I ought to make Denver by five-thirty, allow ten minutes' delay there, leave at five-forty, and get back here at seven-forty—eight at the latest. Then it'll take the expert about five

minutes to open the safe, and that's all."

The girl's breath quickened. "It's a chance," she murmured, thrilled at the prospect. "Can't I go with you?"

He shook his head. "No, we'll have to divide forces. You'll have to remain here. If your father comes home before I get here with the expert, you'll have to keep him out of the library. Play ill—do anything you like; but don't let him open the safe. Do you understand?"

"How will you get into the house?"

"I hadn't considered that." He frowned. "Keep one of the library windows unlatched; that'll do."

"How will I know when the owl has been put back into the safe?"

"I'll sound the horn on the machine four times. You'll hear it." He was buttoning his coat as he spoke. "Good-by. Don't forget what I've told you."

He ran across the room and through the curtains, picking up his hat on the way.

"The Denver road is at the top of the hill," she called after him, as he vaulted the porch rail and dashed across the lawn. "You can't miss it. Good luck!"

Osborne leaped into the seat of the underslung, high-powered car, sent the engine spinning at the touch of the electric starter, and kicked off the muffler. With a snarl, as the gears meshed, the car sprang forward like an unleashed hound, and almost before the girl could take a second breath it was out of sight, leaving behind a drifting cloud of dust.

CHAPTER IV.

ON HIGH GEAR.

HILTON'S hundred-and-twenty-horse-power flyer did not belie its title of the *Blue Streak*. Osborne was by no means an inexperienced driver, but this did not signify he was in the habit of traveling at the rate of a mile a minute. He had ridden with Hilton on numerous courses in the East, and in several instances had been forced to take the wheel.

At the top of the hill he shut off the power long enough to make sure of his turn; yet even at reduced speed the heavy car careened dangerously. But once the big, rough-tread tires bit into the macadamized roadbed Osborne smiled, advanced the throttle, and settled back comfortably in the thick-upholstered seat. Alicia was right; the road was a beauty. If he couldn't make time here, the *Blue Streak* wasn't worth the ten thousand dollars Hilton had paid for it. Whatever Hilton would have said in regard to this foolhardy, record-breaking trip never entered Osborne's mind. He only prayed that the gasoline would hold out and the wheels would stick to the road.

The miles reeled away under the car. Osborne found a pair of goggles under the seat and adjusted them; after that he never removed his fingers from the tape-bound steering wheel. Notch by notch he opened the throttle, and the big car answered obediently. The air sang past his ears. The trees, and fences, and telegraph poles rushed past him in endless confusion. Now and then he passed other cars. The speedometer registered fifty. The exhaust was a continuous roar. Villages flashed up before him and disappeared behind him, like so many pictures thrown upon a screen. The throttle was wide open now. Dust and tiny pebbles stung his face. The trembling needle on the dial crept from fifty to fifty-five, then to sixty. The road stretched on and on ahead like a broad ribbon.

Osborne wondered if there were such things as speed traps in this part of the world. He was breathing easier now, like a runner who has gained his second wind. The fear of unforeseen obstacles began to wear away. The heavy car was rocking from side to side, and he was forced to brace himself in the seat to keep from being hurled into space. Once, on a stretch of down grade, the dial registered sixty-seven miles. He felt a maddening, exhilarating sense of pleasure. The thought of danger was quite beyond him. He seemed to be riding in air.

Suddenly, far in the distance, he saw where the road ascended, and crossed

a railroad track; and, nearing this point, he imagined he heard the ringing of a bell. But he wasn't sure until, just as he started up the incline, he saw the spiderlike gate arms lowering. There was no time to stop or to think. A man was running toward him, waving his arms frantically. His appearance was so ridiculous that Osborne wanted to laugh—but his lips were devoid of all feeling. Then something struck the top of his head. He was hurled back in the seat. By a miracle he did not release his deathlike grip upon the steering wheel. He felt his hat snatched from his head. The car seemed to hang suspended in the air for a moment after it crossed the tracks. Then Osborne felt the impact of the wheels as they gripped the road again. Now they were down on the other side.

The half-stunned driver was conscious of no pain. By some miracle he had escaped death. He realized this dimly, as a man will recall a dream after awakening. The arm of the gate, lowered another inch, would have struck him across the forehead. As it was, it scraped the top of his head, carrying away his hat. His head was bruised, but in an instant he had recovered full consciousness.

Beside the speedometer on the dashboard the clock marked the passing minutes. To Osborne, whose anxious eyes fell upon it at regular intervals, the minutes passed too swiftly. It was half past four now. He had been on the road an hour. Half the race was run. Could he hold out another sixty minutes? His arms were beginning to ache; the constant jar and the strain of holding the wheel were telling on his muscles. The knuckles of his hands showed white, and his fingers were devoid of all feeling. The windshield offered little protection. The rush of air pressed like a weight upon his chest, his coat was torn open, his head began to pain him. Sixty more minutes! Could he stand it?

"This is the pace you read about," he thought. "I'll be fit to enter the Vanderbilt Cup race next year."

Another drop down, down, down into a hollow where the breath was almost sucked from his lungs; then up, up again, while his heart raced with the engine. Spots began to dart before his eyes. He set his teeth grimly.

Suddenly, ahead of him, like a mighty barrier, loomed the purple mountains; clear cut, majestic against the blazing sky, they stretched from horizon to horizon.

"Getting nearer," he murmured. "Getting nearer," the whirring wheels seemed to answer. "Getting nearer," echoed the throbbing engine.

The mountains lifted higher and higher from the level, sage-covered plains. Long's Peak, tipped with its eternal cap of white, like a venerable old giant with gray hair, reared straight ahead of the speeding car. It beckoned like some alluring finger. It was two hundred miles away, but so clear was the air that it did not look to be more than twenty.

A clean, fresh breeze came to Osborne's nostrils now, and with it was borne the scent of pines. It strengthened him like wine. The clock marked five. A road house was passed with a roar and a cloud of blinding dust. Farmhouses became more and more frequent. People rushed to their doors and waved. Horses in the open fields along the road stared wild-eyed as the car screamed by them. Osborne was aware of all this, yet things came into life and whirled behind in such a brief instant that nothing seemed real.

All at once, as his mind went back to the interrupted telephone call, an idea flashed to him. He saw where he might save half an hour—perhaps more—if his plan was carried out. He throttled down as he came within sight of the next road house, and put all his weight upon the pedal brake.

The dust-covered car had no more than stopped when the grimy, bareheaded driver was out of his seat and lurching across the road toward the piazza. The men and women who were sitting around the tables gazed upon him in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Where's—the—the phone?" he inquired hoarsely.

Somebody told him and pointed the way. Osborne lurched into the house and jerked the receiver from the hook. His head throbbed with pain, and all the colors of the rainbow flashed in his eyes. His lips were so parched and dry that he could scarcely talk. But nothing mattered, if only the wires were working between that point and the Merrill office in Denver.

"Gallup six thousand," he called huskily as the operator's voice greeted him. With exasperating slowness the connection was made. His heart pounded swiftly as a man's voice came over the wire.

"Hello! Hello! Merrill Safe Company?"

"Yes."

Osborne tried desperately to explain the whole situation in as few words as possible. "I called you from Cheyenne —couple of hours ago. Do you remember? Yes, yes; from the Truxton Ranch. Wire went out of commission. I'm down here—on the boulevard—in a machine. Don't know where. Got to get your expert right away—must come back to Cheyenne with me. Put him in a car—send him along. I'll meet him somewhere. Hurry!"

Finally, after more argument, the man on the Denver end of the wire understood. "I'll meet you in Brighton —just as soon as I can get there," he said. "My machine is at the door."

Osborne breathed freer, paid the toll, and went out upon the porch. "Brighton?" he inquired. "How far from here?"

"Fifteen miles," somebody volunteered.

The clock marked ten minutes after five as he climbed once more into the car. He cut down his speed to forty miles, and reached the Brighton Hotel without mishap. Here he turned the car around and called for gasoline and water. He saw that the tank was filled and the radiator drained and refilled. He tinkered with the valves and opened the hood as wide as he could, that the overheated engine might have a chance to cool off before the return trip was begun. It took ten minutes to complete these operations. When at last he looked up he found himself the center of a curious crowd of people who instantly began to ply him with questions.

"Looks like you'd been drivin' her pretty hard," one of the interested inner circle volunteered.

"Don't let old Warren catch you, mister. It'll set you back ten dollars. He's hard on the joy riders, he is," another said.

Osborne paid no attention, and, when he had finished, wiped his grimy hands on his coat. In doing so he unconsciously touched the porcelain image that had rested all this time in his pocket. His heart gave a thump. What if, in all his bouncing and jolting, the turquoise owl had been broken? It was a frightful possibility. He drew it out, forgetful of the crowd about him. No, it hadn't been damaged. The beautiful glaze reflected the warm glow of the afternoon sun; the big eyes sent forth a bewildering flash of opalescent color. The image seemed ten times more wonderful to Osborne at this moment than ever before.

"A T'ang piece," he murmured softly, with all the reverence of a connoisseur. "And I'm carrying it around in my pocket like a sack of tobacco."

Suddenly, prompted by the silence, a boy who was hanging on to one of the wheels, cried:

"Gee! Take a squint at the funny bird! What is it, mister?"

The owl went back into Osborne's pocket, and he turned a grave face upon the urchin. "It's a Mexican Fump," he assured him. "Lays square eggs."

"Aw, go on! You're kiddin' us!" another boy responded.

Osborne gave a second look at the clock that was ticking merrily away on the dashboard, and groaned inwardly. That man seemed to be a long time getting here.

"How far are we from Denver?" he asked, looking over the crowd.

"Seven miles," announced the first boy. "I'll show you the way if you'll gimme a ride," he added.

As Osborne climbed into the seat of his car another machine came whirling

out of a dust cloud, and with squeaking brakes drew up beside the *Blue Streak*. The crowd scattered to the edge of the road.

A perspiring man in a linen suit and a wide-brimmed panama hat, weighing close to two hundred and fifty pounds, opened the door of his car and stepped to the ground. Osborne called to him.

"Hello! From the Merrill Safe Company?" he asked.

"That's me." The fat man removed his hat, displaying a bald, sunburned pate, which, in the sunlight, glistened like a gilded dome. "What's all the trouble?" he continued. "Want me to——"

"You're wasting time," Osborne said impatiently. "Get in here and I'll explain as we roll along. Let your chauffeur take your car back to the city."

The ample representative of the Merrill Safe Company stared at the dusty car, whose engines were already throbbing expectantly, and then at the hatless, begrimed driver. Evidently the combination did not make a favorable impression. "My name's Durkin," he began. "You didn't give me much information when I talked over the phone just now, Mr.——"

"For Heaven's sake!" Osborne cried. "Don't stand there talking. This is a serious matter. If we're not in Cheyenne before eight o'clock——"

Durkin waited to hear no more. He climbed into the vacant seat beside Osborne, breathing heavily. The driver's tone of voice and his very appearance implied much. Durkin conjured up all sorts of possibilities. Perhaps a child had been locked in the safe. He had often heard of such instances; in fact, only the week before he had seen a play built around this very situation. He did not know, of course, the size of the safe in the Truxton library; otherwise he might have questioned the need of such haste.

The moment Durkin sank into the seat, Osborne sent in the clutch at high speed, and the *Blue Streak* shot forward like an arrow from a bow. Durkin's hat went sailing as if jerked from his head by an invisible string, and before the astonished representative of the Merrill Safe Company could find breath enough to ask a question, the Brighton Hotel, the gaping crowd, and the panama hat were a mile behind.

CHAPTER V.

FIVE MINUTES' DELAY.

WITH despairing fingers Durkin clung to the edge of his seat. His eyes bulged from his head, his cravat flapped wildly about his ears. "F-for Heaven's sake!" he gasped, "we'll—both be—killed. Stop the car—at once."

Osborne pushed the accelerator up another notch. The hands of the clock marked five-thirty. The needle on the speedometer crept slowly up to forty, passed it, and continued on to fifty.

"We'll make the ranch before eight," he muttered grimly, "or die in the attempt. Don't be alarmed, Mr. Durkin," he shouted consolingly; "we haven't started to go yet."

"This—this is outrageous!" the other spluttered, bouncing from side to side. "It's—positively criminal! Why—why ——" His frightened eyes fell upon the speedometer needle. "We're going fifty miles—an hour."

"Of course we are," answered Osborne; "and we're going to make sixty very shortly. Hold tight! I don't want to stop and pick you up. Every minute counts."

On and on they raced, while the needle crept nearer to the sixty mark. The roar of the exhaust was deafening. The rush of the wind, bringing with it a fine dust, stung the faces of the two men. Their cheeks were purple. Durkin made a futile attempt to shield his smarting eyes with his arms. The mountains, bathed in a flood of gold, dropped away behind the speeding car. The air suddenly cooled. The needle registered fifty-five now.

"We'll — be — arrested," Durkin shouted in Osborne's ear.

"All right—if they can catch us," the latter responded, not in the least perturbed at the warning. He kept his eyes glued to the road ahead of him.

The car was rocking dangerously. A lighter machine, and one that was not underslung, would never have held to the road. He shuddered to think what would be the result if a tire blew out, or an axle snapped, or if his aching fingers relaxed their deathlike hold on the trembling wheel.

A stone, picked up by the front wheels, was hurled against the windshield. A shower of broken glass fell upon the two men. Osborne escaped injury, but a piece must have struck Durkin, for he groaned. He clapped a hand to his forehead, and his fingers came away red.

"I'm hurt!" he cried, terror-stricken.

Osborne turned cautiously in his seat. A tiny cut was visible on the other's forehead. "You're all right, man. No damage done."

But Durkin would not have it that way. "I'm—badly hurt," he protested. "Look—at the blood. Stop instantly."

Osborne sent the speed up to the last notch, while Durkin, crouching low in his seat, continued to groan. A thin line of crimson trickled down over his cheek. Had the blood not been visible Durkin would never have realized he had been hurt; but in his present state of mind the safe expert magnified it a thousandfold.

Suddenly Osborne forgot his companion and uttered an imprecation. They were approaching the railroad crossing again, where he had miraculously escaped decapitation before; and this time a long freight train was crawling toward it. Could he cross ahead of the engine? It would mean a five-minute delay if he didn't, and the minutes were far too precious to waste. Even then Mr. Truxton might have arrived at the ranch house, and for all her tact Alicia could not hope to keep him out of the library for long without arousing his suspicions. He measured the distance with his eye; then, with a sinking heart, he released the clutch and allowed the car to coast. It was too great a risk to take; already the gates were descending.

As he rolled to a gradual stop, a sharp chugging back of him caused Osborne to look around. A man on a motor cycle came racing toward him. The man stopped, dismounted, and hurried up.

"I thought this freight would stop you," he said. "What do you mean by speedin' like this? I saw you goin' down, some time ago, and I laid for you. Now you'll come back with me and explain to the judge."

For a moment Osborne felt that his battle had been lost. This man, who wore a star conspicuously displayed on the lapel of his coat, was doubtless a sheriff. To suffer arrest and be taken back to some village court would mean the end of everything. He could never hope to reach the ranch in time to return the owl if the law took its course. While Osborne had every respect for the majesty of the law, and was ready to plead guilty to speeding on a public highway, he felt that the circumstances attending the present case—which, of course, could not be explained to the judge—were such as to make his offense pardonable.

"I got a dozen witnesses who seen you," the sheriff continued grimly. "I'll show you what we do to fools like you. We'll take away your license and lock up your car for sixty days. And if you get away without a fifty-dollar fine, you'll be in luck."

Osborne's mind had worked swiftly in the past, but in the present it was breaking all records for speed. The fifty-dollar fine wasn't so bad; he would willingly pay that sum to avoid the delay; but to have the sheriff learn that he was without a license—an essential that had been overlooked—and to have Hilton's machine in limbo for two months, was a predicament not to be considered for a minute.

"Why—why you was goin' forty miles an hour," the sheriff announced, "and you can't deny it."

"You're wrong there, sheriff," Osborne replied; "I was going sixty miles."

"Well, you got a nerve! Come along now. Turn your car around, and don't you try no funny business, either. I got my eye peeled."

Remembering his passenger for the first time, and wondering at his protracted silence, Osborne looked around. Durkin was huddled in the seat—dead to all that was passing about him. The combination of speed, a shattered windshield, and threatened arrest, were too much for the expert to stand; he had fainted. Yet, instead of viewing the result with dismay, and counting it as an added liability, this unexpected discovery proved to be Osborne's salvation. The sight of the unconscious man brought a gleam of hope to his mind.

"Look here, sheriff," he said gravely; "you can't detain me; I've got a badly injured man here. He must have medical attention at once. I'm taking him to the Cheyenne hospital. If you delay me his death will be upon your head."

The sheriff craned his neck and gazed at the motionless, hatless figure in the other seat. Durkin had smeared the crimson from the slight wound over his nose and down his cheeks; mixed with the dust, it had dried there. To an observer who did not look too closely, he presented a terrifying spectacle. With blanched face the sheriff stepped back.

The long freight train had passed the crossing. The gates were lifting. Taking advantage of the sheriff's indecision and the open road ahead of him, realizing that it was then or never, Osborne pressed the clutch with his foot, and, as the engine was running at fair speed, the car shot forward, leaving the representative of the law choking in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE RANCH.

FROM the veranda of the Truxton ranch house Alicia had watched the disappearance of the big blue car and its reckless driver with mingled feelings of pleasure and dismay. While she doubted his ability to cover the distance between the ranch and Denver in two hours, she was thrilled at the thought of the race. She knew Osborne had frequently driven Hilton's car; in fact, she had on several occasions accompanied him. The *Blue Streak* was a speed machine, pure and simple; it was geared remarkably high—too high to make it a suitable car for city use. Its ability to "eat up the road" and make other cars take its dust had been fully demonstrated.

Alicia's one concern was for the driver. Osborne had never been over the Denver-Cheyenne boulevard, and this fact alone might prevent him from accomplishing his purpose.

Vance Osborne had come into her life in an unexpected way, and his coming had brought several matters to a crisis. She first met him one afternoon near the tennis courts at Fort Russell, when he was fresh from the East, and a stranger in a strange land, and from that time Osborne seemed to seek her friendship. It was only to Alicia that he confided his impressions of the country and the people.

For a month or more this state of affairs had continued without interruption. Mr. Truxton welcomed Osborne at the ranch and seemed to enjoy his visits, particularly when he learned that the young man was interested in the collection of Chinese porcelains. Then had come the surprising announcement: The ranch owner did not want Osborne to call at the house again. Alicia was at a loss to account for this sudden change. What had happened? What had her father found out that had any bearing on Osborne's visits? And what had led Osborne to declare, after the meeting on the veranda, that under no circumstances must her father know he had seen the owl?

She wished now that she had questioned Osborne more closely. If there was anything between him and her father, she had a right to know it. She sat for a long time in the dimly lighted library trying to fathom the situation. Why had she allowed Osborne to leave the house without asking that the owl be left with her? In the excitement of the moment she had forgotten that the precious bit of porcelain remained hidden in his pocket; no doubt he had forgot it also. Suppose something happened to him? What if he was thrown

from the car, rendered unconscious, picked up by strangers? What if the owl fell into dishonest hands? What if it was broken?

The more she dwelt on these possibilities, the more nervous she became. She went upstairs and changed her dress, and by that time it was five o'clock. Osborne would be in Denver then—if nothing unforeseen had happened. She might find out by calling up the office of the Merrill Company; they would know. Brightening at this prospect, she hurried to the phone, only to learn from the operator that the Denver wire was still out of commission.

"The trouble is on the Cheyenne end," the operator informed her. "It should be repaired within half an hour. If your message is important, I can relay it through Laramie——"

"Never mind," Alicia said, hanging up the receiver.

Recalling her father's instructions in regard to dinner, she went through the hall and into the kitchen, where Chee Sam, singing to himself, was hovering industriously over the hot range.

"We will have dinner promptly at seven, Sam," she said. "And if my father isn't here at that hour, you are to keep something warm until he returns. There will be no company."

Sam nodded. "Mlister Osborne—he not come back?" he asked.

"Certainly not." Alicia looked around quickly. "Why, what made you think he would?"

Sam's eyes twinkled. "He go away click. I hear him say he be back to-night."

Alicia put her hand to her mouth as if to keep back the question that trembled upon her lips. Had Sam overheard any of the conversation between Osborne and herself? Would he understand what it was about?

"Mr. Osborne will not return," she said quite firmly; adding, after due reflection: "For dinner."

Then, not wishing to betray any of the agitation she felt, Alicia turned and walked out into the garden, where, thanks to the irrigating ditches, flowers were blooming in profusion. Slim-stalked sunflowers, their yellow heads drooping heavily, formed a protecting screen between the garden and the road. Flaming California poppies ran along the side of the wall like lines of fire, their faces turned westward to catch the last of the sun rays. Gayly colored nasturtiums bordered the gravel paths; stately hollyhocks watched over them, the bell-like flowers a haven for the numberless bees. Rows of sweet peas, waist-high, filled the air with a drowsy fragrance.

Alicia picked a great handful of these for the table, and was just crossing the veranda when her father's machine rolled up. He stepped out and walked toward her.

"You didn't go to the fort, after all, did you?" he asked.

"No, I didn't feel like playing," she told him.

"I came past there just now," Mr. Truxton continued, gazing at her anxiously. "They said you had disappointed them. Not ill, are you?"

She shook her head and laughed. "Of course not."

"Not brooding over what I told you before I left?" he insisted.

"I can't help feeling badly over it," she confessed.

"Where is he?"

"You mean Mr. Osborne? He's gone."

"You told him what I said?"

"No, I couldn't," she responded truthfully. "Besides, it is unfair, both to Mr. Osborne and to myself. I couldn't forbid his coming here without giving him some good reason."

Mr. Truxton frowned. "Very well. I will give you my reason. Suppose we go into the library——"

"No, no!" she broke out, interrupting him. "Not in there. It's—it's much too warm. Let's stay on the veranda."

She realized now, with a quick catch of her breath, and not without a certain thrill, that her part of the battle had begun. Osborne would depend upon her. Without her help his ride to Denver and back would be wasted. And until she heard those four blasts of the horn—a signal that the owl was back

in the safe—she must exert every bit of tact, every ounce of cleverness she possessed to keep her father away from the library.

Mr. Truxton made no objection to remaining on the veranda. He dropped into a low wicker chair, while Alicia faced him expectantly, leaning on the broad parapet.

"This Osborne," he began, without preliminary words, "is in the employ of Blumly Brothers, of New York City."

"I knew that," she said.

"And do you know who they are—the firm, I mean?" he continued.

"I presume they're dealers and collectors, aren't they?"

The ranchman nodded. "Yes; and they are one of the largest firms in America. But I hadn't an inkling that Osborne was connected with them until yesterday. I knew he was with some collecting firm, but as he never informed me I did not think it my privilege to question him. In fact, on several occasions he deliberately changed the subject when business was mentioned. I thought little of it at the time, but I see now where he had good reasons for keeping his mouth shut."

"Well?" said Alicia.

"He has told you, of course, why he came to Cheyenne?"

"He's on a vacation; you knew that."

"And do you believe him?"

"He hasn't given me any cause to doubt him," she replied.

Mr. Truxton was silent for a moment, his troubled eyes gazing far off over the plains. With the sinking sun the heavens were ablaze with color; the air freshened and cooled. Alicia buried her face in the bouquet of flowers she held, breathing deep of their fragrance, waiting for her father to continue.

"Cheyenne isn't as nice a place for a vacation as Europe, or Asia," the ranchman resumed.

"What do you mean, father?" He had made almost the same remark to Mr. Osborne on the veranda.

"Well, for ten years Osborne has spent his summers abroad—principally in China—as a collector for his firm. I understand he commands a good salary, and that he has been very successful. Now these trips are a necessity in his business—as necessary as my trips to the Chicago packers; they are a source of revenue to his employers. Competition is keen; wealthy patrons are forever waiting with open check books for what these 'scouts' may bring back. Now, in view of this, isn't it strange that Osborne should want to waste a whole summer out here? Isn't it doubtful that his firm would permit it?"

"But the summer isn't wasted," argued Alicia. "Every one needs a vacation—even collectors."

"I presume that is his defense," said Truxton. "It is a plausible one, too, if you're not acquainted with the facts. But first of all you must remember this: Osborne is not in Wyoming for pleasure. Blumly Brothers cannot afford to have a man of his ability loafing. He is drawing his salary each month. The Blumlys are looked up to as the most successful collectors in the country; they seldom fail to carry out any assignment given them. In fact, there are stories in regard to their efforts that are not generally known. When they accept a commission from a wealthy patron they do not count the cost. If they can't buy what they want, they'll use stronger methods. Oh, I know! Merchants in China will not do business with a Blumly agent if they can help it; any collector will tell you that. If the merchants have a valuable bit of porcelain, they never allow the fact to become known to the Blumlys. Why? Well, there have been several instances, to my knowledge, where certain antiques have disappeared, along with their owners. Shops have been burned and merchants have been found later in the river. The patrons to whom these treasures go eventually never ask questions. That is one of the Blumly requirements."

Alicia, listening attentively, was slowly getting the drift of her father's explanation. She was outwardly disinterested, but inwardly her mind was concerned with a thousand possibilities.

"I'm not intimating, of course, that Mr. Osborne was ever concerned in these outrages," Mr. Truxton went on. "I am only speaking of the firm. They are unscrupulous to a degree. There are some things in my collection that the Blumlys would like to have—that their patrons would give almost any sum for. Osborne comes to Cheyenne, ostensibly on a vacation, but in reality to find out just what I own. To help matters along, he pretends to be interested in you, Alicia, and——"

"Father!" the girl interrupted sharply. "You can't mean that! Mr. Osborne isn't a cad. You are doing him an injustice. It isn't right."

"How did he meet you?" Mr. Truxton asked.

"He asked for an introduction."

"Had he met any of the other girls?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Has he shown any interest in the other girls?"

"Not a great deal."

Mr. Truxton smiled. "That confirms my suspicions. He planned this out. He knew that through you he would gain entrance to my library, look over my collection, find out if I possessed anything of value. But he must not come here again. I must not run any chances."

"Chances of what?" demanded the girl, her cheeks filled with sudden color. "Do you think Mr. Osborne would deliberately steal any of your treasures?"

"I must not give him the opportunity," answered Truxton, evading a direct reply.

Alicia's thoughts went galloping back to the owl. In spite of her faith in Osborne, her heart sank a trifle. She remembered now that he had pleaded hard to see the porcelain, that he had made no attempt to conceal his admiration; and he had taken it away with him!

"They don't know of my greatest treasure," Mr. Truxton said softly. "Ah, if they only suspected! Why, I wouldn't have the Blumlys or their agents know of the turquoise owl for all of the Truxton Ranch." His eyes brightened. "And to think I should find it—the one hope that is in the heart of every collector. To think that, after all these years, it rests secure in my safe; the last of my collecting, and the most wonderful." His hand went out and covered one of Alicia's. "It's our secret, isn't it, dear? Yours and mine."

CHAPTER VII.

THE INTRUDER.

LIKE a great yellow wafer the sun had dropped below the rim of the world. The shadows took possession of the veranda, and for this Alicia was glad. Despite her control, her face betrayed her feelings; but now, in the dusk, her father could not see.

What if Osborne was the man her father believed him to be? What if he had schemed to get possession of the owl? What if this intended race to Denver had been merely a ruse to take him from her sight? How could she ever explain?

Chee Sam came out and announced dinner; and arm in arm the father and daughter went into the dining room. Alicia arranged the flowers in a wide-mouthed bowl, and sank into the chair that the Oriental drew out for her.

"What time is it?" she asked, when the meal was half finished and Chee Sam had left them.

"Seven-thirty," Mr. Truxton announced.

Seven-thirty! Osborne must surely be there. Perhaps he had already arrived. Perhaps he and the expert were even now in the library. She caught herself listening to every sound. She tried to eat, but the food was tasteless and choked her. Once she heard, quite distinctly, the honk of a horn. The knife fell from her fingers and clattered to her plate. The sound was not repeated, and her heart sank.

"Are you expecting some one?" her father asked.

She nodded with as much unconcern as she could command. "I—I suppose some of the tennis crowd will call. They may think I am ill."

Chee Sam cleared away the dishes and brought in the coffee. Mr. Truxton sighed heavily and fumbled in his waistcoat pockets. Then, with a frown, he pushed back his chair.

"What is the trouble?" Alicia asked, alert on the instant.

"I want a cigar. Guess I left my case in the library."

Alicia was on her feet in a flash. She managed to keep a smiling face. "You sit right down, father," she commanded, pushing him back into his chair; "you're tired. I'll get the cigar for you."

She hurried away before he could protest. She opened the library door cautiously. The room was deserted; Osborne had not returned. What was keeping him? After a search she found the cigar case and went back with it into the dining room.

Just as Mr. Truxton was lighting his cigar, the telephone bell rang.

Once more Alicia's heart gave a sudden bound. Was it Osborne? Was it news of an accident?

"I think that is for me," said the ranchman, getting to his feet, and taking down the receiver before she could stop him.

Alicia sank into a chair, her hands working nervously in her lap. She scarcely dared to breathe. Chee Sam, hovering in the background, ostensibly arranging the glasses on the serving table, smiled to himself; but the girl did not see.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Truxton was saying, "this is the Truxton Ranch. You say the Denver wire is in commission? Well, what of it? No, certainly not. I don't want to speak with Denver. No, you must have confused the numbers. There is nobody here who wants to speak with Denver."

He hung up the receiver and returned to the table and his cigar.

"That operator insisted that I wanted to be notified when the Denver wire was working," he said, unfolding a Cheyenne paper that Chee Sam had placed before him.

Alicia drew a quick breath of relief as this unexpected stretch of thin ice had been safely crossed, and continued to watch her father. He glanced through the paper, read aloud the reports from the Chicago and Kansas City stock yards, commented upon prices quoted, and finally, dropping his cigar into the tray, got to his feet.

Alicia, instantly on her guard, caught his arm. She knew that he was starting for the library. He always went there when he had finished his after-dinner cigar, to browse through his books.

"Daddy," she said impulsively, holding him back, "suppose we go out for a ride? There's a wonderful moon."

The ranchman shook his head. "Not to-night, dear; I've been riding all day. I'm going to look through some of the new magazines and go to bed early. I'm very tired."

"But—but you haven't taken me out for more than a week," she protested "And—I've been in the house all day. I've a headache, and——"

Mr. Truxton smiled and slipped his arm about the girl's waist. "There, now. You stay with me to-night. Come into the library. We'll look through some of those wonderful color plates; I know you'll be interested. I'll explain them, too. You know," he went on, "there's a reproduction of my turquoise owl among them; I saw it this morning. You should see it; it doesn't any more resemble the original than—than you do." He laughed as they walked down the hall. "Fact is, no one knows just what the owl looks like—that is, no one but you and I—and they describe it as being a foot high, with an underglaze——"

"I don't want to hear about the old owl," the girl persisted. "You think more of it than you do of me. I want you to talk with me to-night; I'm lonesome. Let's go on the veranda."

Anything to gain time! Osborne might even then be in the library. The opening of the door might disclose him in front of the safe. But for once in his life Mr. Truxton was stubborn, and would not give way to his daughter's pleadings. The new magazines and color plates had arrived that morning;

he was eager to look through them—as ardent as a child at the prospect of gazing upon a new toy. He fairly dragged the girl along the hall. He opened the library door and closed it softly behind them.

The library was a mysterious place; it was talked of from one end of Wyoming to another. It contained innumerable glass-covered cases and tall cabinets, filled, as Alicia expressed it—since she shared in none of the enthusiasm displayed by her father—with a hodge-podge of junk. Through the deep-set, stained-glass windows struggled a faint, unreal light; even at midday, when the blistering Wyoming sun poured a golden radiance from the brassy, cloudless skies, the room and its contents were shrouded in curious shifting and melting shadows. Faded and threadbare, but priceless, tapestries hung on the walls; old bronzes filled a hundred niches; curious bits of pottery were arranged on the low shelves; frightful images in agonizing postures stared one in the face at every turn; squat Japanese idols smiled eternally beside rare vases of Mohammedan blue. Rust-eaten urns, grotesquely shaped animals, copper chains, and rare bits of carved ivory, yellow as saffron, filled the many cases.

Truxton led the way to a window seat. The girl sank upon the cushions, but retained a determined grip on her father's arm. Would he go directly to the safe? Would he want to compare the owl with the color print?

Truxton reached over and opened the big window. The moonlight streamed in. "My, how bright it is," he remarked, gazing out over the wide expanse of lawn and the flower garden, which was bathed in luminous silver. "Like day, isn't it?" He looked down into his daughter's face. "Why—why, Alicia, you're trembling!"

She tried to laugh, but it was a ghastly attempt. "I'm just—just a little upset," she said. Her voice was unsteady.

"Well, now," declared Truxton, "I have it! It's almost as nice here as in the machine, and far more comfortable. We won't put on the lights. I'll get the books, and we'll go through them. How's that, eh? The moonlight is better than electricity, isn't it?"

She nodded. There was nothing left for her to do. She could not hope to get him out of the room now without exciting his suspicion. And, perhaps, if she thought hard enough, a plan would come to her. Something had to be done.

The ranchman went over to the table, tore the wrappers from the magazines, and returned to the window seat. Directly opposite to where they were sitting stood the safe, and above it was the window she had unlocked that Osborne and the expert might gain entrance to the room. Suppose they should come in now? There was no light to warn them that the library was occupied. They would walk into the trap.

The situation was becoming unbearable. Alicia grew hot and cold by turns. Her father was thumbing over the plates, pointing to this and that reproduction, talking all the while, but the girl did not hear or see; her ears were keyed for the rumble of a car. Perhaps she could warn Osborne before he lifted the window. What might happen if her father saw the two men at the window was, to her mind, too terrifying to contemplate.

"And here's a Baluster plate," Truxton was saying, "dated fourteen hundred and thirty—value, six hundred dollars." He laughed softly. "It doesn't compare with mine!"

He went on and on. At intervals she heard and followed him; again her mind went back to the situation that was before her.

"Ah, here we are!" the ranchman announced, raising his voice. She looked down. He had found the color plate of the owl. The very sight of it added to her discomfort. The ranchman studied it very carefully, reading aloud the description. The girl listened.

"The value isn't stated," he said, "and they are not positive whether the image exists or not. 'There were two of these rare pieces made early in the T'ang

dynasty,' he read. 'The remains of one was found in a ruined courtyard, in eighteen hundred and seventy, by Hollister, of the British Museum. The glaze is remarkable for its depth and shading.' "

A clock, hidden from view, chimed eight times. Truxton seemed too absorbed in his study to hear it. Alicia counted each stroke. The driver of the *Blue Streak* had met with an accident, she reasoned swiftly; otherwise he would have been back before that. Or was it possible that he was outside, even now—that he had seen her father and herself at the window, or heard their voices? The thought gave her but little consolation. Either way, the situation was not relieved. If Osborne had returned and was outside the window, he was no better off than he would be a hundred miles away. The owl had yet to be replaced.

Alicia realized, not once, but a hundred times, and with a steadily sinking heart, that her father would never leave the library until he had at least peeked into the safe, even if only to satisfy himself that his treasure of treasures was secure. He was a creature of habit; he had been doing this for the past six months, and there was no chance that he would overlook it that night.

Suddenly Alicia's roving eyes caught the glitter of something on a shelf at her father's elbow; she had not noticed it before. Leaning over to obtain a better view, she uttered an exclamation. The glitter was the reflection of the moonlight on the polished barrel of a revolver. Where had it come from? Truxton, looking up at the exclamation, and following her gaze, put out his hand and covered the weapon.

"Oh," he said, surprised, "my revolver! I had it with me this morning, and forgot where I laid it. Took a shot at a coyote." He forgot his books for a moment, and toyed with the wicked, snub-nosed weapon. "Maybe I'm getting old, but my hands are pretty steady," he resumed, with a touch of pride in his voice. "I hit that coyote square between the eyes—and at a hundred yards, too. Made me think of old times."

He gave a reminiscent chuckle. "This old gun has stood by me more than once, Alicia," he began. "Guess I've carried it for twenty years. I killed a man with it, too. Remember as if it was yesterday. It was a night like this—moon full and bright as day. We'd been rounding up some strays. We came across the fellow—a rustler—driving off some of the calves. He had been giving us a lot of trouble all that year. Well, we all went after him; I got ahead of the others, and when he saw he had me alone he turned his horse and sent a couple of shots through my leg. A third nipped my ear, but by that time I was in action, too; I wasn't enjoying the one-sided affair. I let him have a little of his own medicine, and pitched him to the ground with the first shot."

While he was talking he had leveled the revolver, at arm's length, and was squinting along the short barrel. It was directed toward the window, the window above the safe—the one Alicia had unlocked, and through which Osborne might at any minute appear.

"Guess I'll leave the gun in here after this," Mr. Truxton observed calmly, as if the idea had just dawned upon him, and he was pleased with it. "Handy place to have it. Now if any one should come prowling around——"

The ranchman stopped in the middle of his sentence. A slight sound had reached his ears—and Alicia's as well. Both sat rigid with expectancy. The sound was repeated. Some one was outside and below the unlocked window. Alicia, knowing only too well who it was, started to cry out, but Truxton's hand fell upon her lips.

Then her staring eyes beheld the shadow of a head against the window-pane; a hand came up, and the window was slowly, cautiously lifted. Once again she tried to speak. She must tell her father that the man at the window was Osborne, that everything was all right, that she would explain. But the thing that followed came too swiftly.

The ranchman had leaned forward,

breathing heavily. A flash of fire relieved the moonlight in the room; a report rang out, followed by a cry, shrill and piercing. The shadow in the window disappeared as if jerked by an invisible string. The powder smoke drifted in the quiet air. So sudden had all this come, and so quickly was it over, that Alicia never realized that the scream was her own.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STUMBLINGBLOCK.

WHEN Osborne left the sheriff far behind him, choking in the cloud of dust, and the heavy car leaped across the railroad tracks, he breathed easier. The sheriff and his motor cycle could never overtake him. Whether the representative of the law believed his story or not was of small consequence. He had at least been impressed, and Durkin had, all unconsciously, played well his part.

Once they were far from the scene of trouble, Durkin came back to earth again. The rush of cool air revived him. He groaned and sat up weakly. "Where—where in the devil——" he began; then, apparently remembering what had passed, grinned foolishly. "Did—I faint?"

"You did," answered Osborne, adding to himself: "And a lucky thing, too!"

Osborne soon had the car spinning along at a fifty-mile clip; and, once recovered from his shock, Durkin began almost to enjoy it.

"I thought I was killed, sure!" he declared, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, and feeling tenderly of the cut above his eye.

The sun had dropped below the mountains now, and in the dusk the road grew more and more difficult to follow. Osborne turned a button on the dashboard, and the powerful headlights leaped into life. He watched the clock with troubled eyes. The delay at the crossing had cost him five precious minutes, and there was little prospect of making it up now. At the rate they were going, he could not hope to reach the ranch before half past seven.

The strain of the race began to tell upon the driver; his arms felt numb from the jar of the steering wheel, and every muscle in his body ached. The needle of the speedometer held closely to fifty. He did not dare exceed that speed now. The quivering bands of light, dancing a hundred feet ahead of him, picked out the objects on either side of the road—then lost them as the car raced on.

The long hill that marked the final miles of the journey brought a welcome exclamation from Osborne. "We're almost there, now!" he told his passenger.

But the last dozen miles seemed to be the longest, and it was eight o'clock when he swung the car off the boulevard and turned into the rough side road that led toward the Truxton ranch house. He extinguished all the lights and slowed down the engine. In the shadow of the high hedge he put his foot upon the brake pedal, and the car stopped without a sound. He got out of his seat and jumped awkwardly to the ground.

"All right, Durkin," he announced, moving about in an attempt to restore the circulation in his cramped arms and legs.

The expert climbed down. "Gee, I'm stiff! Where do we go from here? I'm not very presentable. Sorry about that panama hat," he added, as if the fact of having lost it weighed heavily on his mind. "Cost me twenty-five dollars."

"Never mind, I'll buy you another one," Osborne said. "Come along, and don't make any unnecessary noise."

Durkin seemed puzzled at this last remark, but as Osborne had already started away, he said nothing. It was only when they had left the path and were skirting the deep shadows of another hedge that he grew suspicious.

"Look here," he broke out, "why all this gumshoe business? Are you afraid of being caught?"

"Certainly not," said Osborne. They had reached the opposite side of the house now. The only lights visible were

in the kitchen and dining room. The library windows were dark.

"I refuse to go another step until you explain," remonstrated the expert. "This doesn't look right to me. I feel like a sneak. What are you afraid of?"

"Everything's all right, Durkin. Don't be worried. It's a little out of the ordinary, but——"

"I should think it was out of the ordinary," broke in the other. "I don't like it." A sudden suspicion entered his mind. "Are you Mr. Truxton?" he demanded.

"No, but that has nothing to do with ——" began Osborne.

"It has everything to do with it," Durkin protested. "Isn't it his safe I'm to open?"

"It is."

"Where is Mr. Truxton—at the house?"

"I hope not." Osborne spoke before he thought.

"What's that?" Durkin asked sharply. "Not at the house? Then where do you expect to find him? You know I can't touch the safe unless the owner gives me permission."

"Don't be foolish, Durkin," replied Osborne. "We've had enough trouble getting here. The safe must be opened —and within a very few minutes, too. There's nothing crooked in it. Miss Truxton is concerned in the matter. Surely you will take her word——"

"I'll take Truxton's word—or none," Durkin interrupted once more. "I don't know who you are, and I don't know what sort of a scheme you're trying to put over. But the safe isn't yours, and that settles it."

"But I tell you, Durkin, that everything's all right; it's on the level. I'm not going to take anything out of the safe; I want to put something back."

"Did you take this—this something out?"

"No; I didn't. But Miss Truxton did, and for her sake it must be returned. Now let's not delay matters."

"I can do nothing," said Durkin, "until I have seen Mr. Truxton. The safe is his property. I wouldn't touch it without his permission. You should have known that in the first place."

"I realize the position you're in, Durkin," Osborne replied, in a determined effort to convince the other that his proposition was not a questionable one, "and I can imagine how you feel about opening a safe without the owner's permission. If I could take time to explain the whole situation I know you would look at it in a different light. But as it is, you must accept my word. Something of value has been taken from the safe, and it must be returned before Mr. Truxton misses it. If not, the one to suffer will——"

That was as far as he got. A muffled shot sounded, followed by a scream; and hardly had this died away when a man dashed past them, disappearing through the hedge in the direction of the road.

"Great guns!" exclaimed Durkin. "What was that?"

Lights were appearing in the other windows of the house; loud voices were raised.

"Trouble somewhere," muttered Osborne, peering ahead.

Durkin clutched his arm. "I—I don't like this—at all. Looks bad! Let's get out. There's too much mystery attached to this affair to suit me."

Osborne was of the same opinion, although he said nothing of it to the expert. Men were running across the veranda; everything seemed to be in an uproar. He realized, with sinking heart, that the turquoise owl would not be returned to the safe that night. Whatever the trouble was up at the house, Osborne did not relish the idea of being found hiding on the premises; not alone for himself, but for Durkin as well. The expert, already suspicious, would probably pour out the whole story to clear himself; and such a prospect was to be avoided.

"Come along, Durkin," he said, reaching for the other's arm. "We'll disappear until things have quieted down."

But, much to his amazement, he did not find Durkin's arm, nor did Durkin's voice respond—for the simple reason that the Denver expert had faded

from sight and hearing. The succession of events had apparently proved too trying. He probably connected the shot with Osborne's appearance on the scene, and as having some bearing upon the proposed opening of the safe; so he naturally concluded that the best thing for him to do was to make a quiet and hurried exit, leaving the stage to those who understood the play.

As Osborne stood there, undecided as to what to do, several men rushed past him. He noticed, with a frown, that they were armed with rifles. When they had disappeared he resolved upon a new plan; he would get into communication with Alicia. Perhaps he could help her; at least he would get at the bottom of this mystery. So, with infinite care, and with good luck attending him, he made his way along, hugging the shadows. He reached the garden without detection, and managed to get close to the open dining-room window.

The sight that greeted him when he at last gained this point of vantage was a startling one. Truxton, his arms hanging limply, was being carried out of the room and up the stairs. With colorless face Alicia was standing beside the door.

"It's all right, Miss Truxton," one of the men was saying. "Your father isn't hurt much. Just twisted a leg. The doctor'll fix him up in a jiffy."

With their burden the men left the room and continued up the stairs. Alicia, hesitating, glanced swiftly around. She was about to follow the others when Osborne, placing his hands upon the low window sill, vaulted lightly into the room. She whirled, stared at him blankly for a second, then broke into a guarded cry.

"Mr. Osborne!"

"What's happened?" he responded.

"You—you're not hurt?" she asked.

"Hurt? Certainly not!" Her behavior puzzled him. "What do you mean?"

"Why—you were at the window—father fired, and——"

"I wasn't at the window," he interrupted; "I was out on the lawn. Is your father hurt?"

Osborne's sudden appearance had brought the color into the girl's cheeks. Recovered from her first shock, she launched into a breathless explanation, and in a rush of words told him of the torturing half hour in the library, the finding of the revolver, the noise at the window, and the shot. Osborne listened eagerly, his face a study.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, as she finished, and the situation was clearer. "What a close shave!"

"And—and it wasn't you?" she insisted.

"No, indeed; but it might have been. If it hadn't been for the delay at the railroad crossing, or that stubborn expert——" He stopped and shook his head. "What an escape!" he added.

"After father had fired he sprang for the window," the girl continued. "He must have fallen and wrenched his leg. I—I don't know just what did happen. Everything was blurred to me. I guess I screamed. Then the others came in and the lights went on. I thought, of course, that it was you, and tried to explain to the men; but they were too excited to listen."

"Lucky thing you didn't," Osborne remarked. "Some one else had designs upon the safe, it seems. Whoever it was rushed past me just after the shot was fired, and disappeared through the hedge. Do you think he was hit?"

"Yes; the men found bloodstains on the sill."

Osborne pursed his lips. "If that's the case, he can't get far away," he said.

"Where is the expert you brought?" Alicia asked quickly.

"He disappeared when he heard the shot. He may be halfway back to Denver by this time, if he's running just as fast. It's just as well, though," he added, after reflection.

"Why?"

"He refused to touch the safe without your father's permission. Of course, he didn't know what I was up to, and I couldn't very well explain."

"What are we to do now?" the girl

asked, realizing that the trip to Denver had been in vain.

"I don't know exactly," Osborne admitted. "There's one thing in our favor, though: If your father has a wrenched leg, he'll be kept in bed for a day or two; he can't get down to the library. That will give us time to put other plans into operation. We'll win out yet; I'm sure of that."

"But suppose this expert from Denver sees father? Suppose he tells him about the automobile trip?"

"Durkin must never see your father!" Osborne declared. "If he does—well, it's all over with us."

"How are you to prevent it?" the girl argued gloomily. "This man has disappeared. You don't know where he is. By this time he must realize there is something puzzling in the affair, and may think it his duty to acquaint father with the part he has played."

"I don't know about that," said Osborne. "It may strike him just the other way. He may think it best to wash his hands of the whole affair. In that case, he will hurry back to Denver and forget all about the afternoon's adventure."

"Let us hope that he will," murmured Alicia. She glanced swiftly about the room and lowered her voice. "What about the owl? You still have it?"

Osborne patted his pocket. "Right here. It's been a god of good luck. If I was the least bit superstitious——"

"Don't take it out," she interrupted, in a warning whisper. "Some one may be watching us."

"Shall I keep it?"

The recollection of what her father had said came back to her, but all the doubt and fear of the past had flown. She knew now that Osborne was to be trusted; the mad race to Denver had proved it. For five hours the turquoise owl had been in his possession, and he had risked his own life that the image might be returned to the safe.

"Yes," she answered; "I want you to keep it. It will be safer with you. I can trust you."

He regarded her with puzzled eyes. "Why shouldn't you trust me?" he asked slowly.

She did not answer, and for a moment a quick, hurting suspicion entered his heart. He recalled the meeting with Truxton on the veranda several hours earlier. Was it possible that the ranchman had made any later mention of the affair in Hankau?

"Miss Truxton," he continued gravely, "I have taken the owl away, and I have brought it back again."

"Please—don't say that," she said; "I—I didn't mean it in that way."

"Perhaps it would be better if you kept the image here," he went on. "Then you will not worry."

Before she could reply, several of the men who had carried the ranch owner up to his room came down the stairs. They stopped in the doorway. All of them knew Osborne; and while they might have wondered at his unexpected appearance, they did not, outwardly at least, view him with suspicion.

Welch, the foreman on the ranch, a slim, wiry, middle-aged man, with snapping, boyish eyes, nodded to Osborne and turned to Alicia. "The doctor's here, Miss Truxton," he said. "You don't need to worry; your father is all right. Gave his leg a bad twist; that's all. The doctor said it would keep him in bed for a few days. He's asking for you."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Welch," she replied. "Mr. Osborne just happened along in his car; he heard the shot and came in. He thought he might be of some assistance."

"Guess you can't do much now," observed Welch. "The fellow got away, but the boys are after him. We know he's been hit. Don't think he'll get far unless he has a horse."

"I saw a man running across the lawn just after the shot was fired," said Osborne; "must have been the fellow you want. He disappeared before I knew what had happened."

"Going toward the road, was he?" the foreman inquired.

"Yes."

A door opened and shut, and some one came running down the hall. Then

a happy-faced puncher appeared in the doorway. "We caught him, boys!" he sang out.

"Where?" cried a dozen others.

"Found him hidin' under the hedge by the road. Tried to get away first by crawlin' along the irrigatin' ditch; but we nabbed him. Says he don't know nothin' about the shootin'."

"Don't, eh? Well, we'll soon find out," broke in Welch. "Where'd you take him?"

"To the bunk house."

The foreman and the other punchers broke down the hall on a run. Osborne turned to Alicia. "I'll go along with them. You go upstairs to your father. I'll see you to-morrow. Don't worry; everything's going to turn out all right."

He ran down the hall and out of the door. Then he struck across the lawn in the direction of the punchers' quarters. The voices guided him, and presently he saw the lights in the bunk houses. The other men who had preceded him, led by Welch, had already reached the main house, and, as Osborne approached, he saw that they had gathered in the big room, crowding about the captured man.

One amazed glance Osborne shot through the window, then stopped as suddenly as if a stone wall had sprung up before him. There, under the lights, within a dozen feet of him, hatless, plastered with mud from head to foot, stood the prisoner—hapless, terror-stricken Mr. Durkin.

CHAPTER IX.

THIN ICE.

FOR a moment Osborne was too surprised to move. He stood in the shadows of a cottonwood, his eyes riveted to the picture viewed through the lighted window of the bunk house. The sight of the expert, Durkin, a prisoner in the hands of Truxton's men, was startling enough in itself, to say nothing of the situation it involved. Osborne faced this unexpected problem with a sinking heart.

In a foolish attempt to avoid mixing in an affair that he did not understand, Durkin had hidden away, to be discovered by the punchers, and suspected, naturally enough, of being the unknown who had sought to gain entrance to the Truxton library. When he had been made to realize his predicament he would be only too eager to explain to his captors the errand that had brought him to the ranch.

"Thank Heaven he didn't get a glimpse of me," Osborne murmured, aware that recognition would kill every hope.

He made a wide and cautious detour, and approached the bunk house from the rear. In this position, masked by heavy shadows, he was able to get close to the wall, and obtain a good view of the room through a partly open window. Before preparing for the coming struggle—whatever it might be—he determined to learn just what Durkin had to say for himself, and, what was of greater importance, just how his captors were going to take the explanation.

A nearer view of the prisoner brought a smile to Osborne's lips; for in spite of the threatening situation, Durkin was an object that might have forced a smile to the turquoise owl itself. His linen suit was mud-spattered and water-soaked. One of his coat sleeves had been ripped from shoulder to cuff; his bald head had been scratched by his sudden plunge into the hedge. He had evidently had a collision in the dark, for one eye was partly closed and swelling rapidly. Both hands were black with mud.

"I demand to see Mr. Truxton at once," he was saying, as Osborne came within earshot. "At once—do you hear me? This is an outrage! I can explain my presence here in a very few words."

"The governor will be tickled to see you," one of the punchers said, "but he ain't receiving visitors after nine o'clock."

"Just you keep cool, Fatty," another said, grinning. "To-morrow's visitin' day at this ranch."

The punchers were treating the affair as a huge joke. It was only when

Welch arrived on the scene that the affair became at all serious. The foreman questioned Durkin for a few minutes without getting satisfactory answers.

"How did you get that cut on your forehead?" he at last demanded.

"I was struck by a piece of glass," began Durkin.

"Glass?" Welch shrugged and laughed with the others. "That's where Truxton's bullet nipped you. We don't want any stronger evidence."

"How'd you ever get up to the window?" asked somebody.

"Aw, he didn't get up," put in a second puncher. "He was let down from the roof."

Durkin looked about him helplessly. "I tell you, gentlemen," he began earnestly, lifting his muddy hands, "this is a serious matter. Please take me to Mr. Truxton. He will welcome my explanation."

"What brought you to the ranch?" asked Welch.

"I came to open a safe——"

"You admit it, do you?" broke in the foreman. "Well, what do you know about that? You're frank, at least."

"No, no," protested the expert. "Hear me out. I was brought from Denver in an automobile."

"Sure it wasn't an airship?"

"An automobile," Durkin resumed desperately. "I was driven fifty miles an hour. I don't know the name of the man who drove the car, but it was through him that I——"

"Maybe it was Barney Oldfield," shouted one of the punchers.

"You shouldn't go riding with men you don't know, Hortense," joined in another.

"And this man," Durkin continued, plodding on in spite of the interruptions, "insisted that I open a safe."

"The brute!"

"But I refused. Then I heard a shot."

"Felt it, you mean," corrected the foreman, with a significant glance at the other's forehead.

"I was confused at the noise," the expert resumed patiently, "and, fearing that I would be implicated in some unpleasant affair, I decided to leave."

"You didn't try hard enough," volunteered Welch.

"Stop this nonsense!" Durkin cried, his voice breaking. "I'm trying to tell you the truth. Can't you let me speak? You'll suffer for this outrage, all of you. I'm a respected citizen of Denver. My name is William Durkin. If you will communicate with my office you——"

"With the sheriff, you mean," broke in a listener.

"Your name will be Dennis to-morrow," added another.

"Say, Fatty, who gave you the bum lamp?"

"Where's your hair? Did you lose it in the hedge?"

The continued banter proved too much for Durkin. He realized that it was useless to argue with the men. He was scarcely aware that his very appearance was against him. A man in his condition could never be taken seriously; and the more he protested and the louder he talked, the more ludicrous he appeared in the eyes of the punchers.

Even Osborne, disturbed as he was over the situation, was forced to laugh. While he could not help sympathizing with the distressed Durkin in his futile and painful efforts to explain his position, the fact that the audience were not inclined to take him seriously was a great relief. Had the situation been reversed, it would have provoked anything but laughter.

The foreman must have concluded the raillery had gone far enough, and that nothing was to be gained from it, for he quieted the men with a wave of his hand. "That'll do, boys," he said. "Scatter! I'll take care of the prisoner. You've had fun enough for one night."

"What you going to do with him?" inquired several of the men at once, pulling long faces at the prospect of leaving.

"Guess I'll lock him up in one of the empty bunk houses," Welch replied. "We can turn him over to the sheriff

in the morning if necessary. I'll have to see what the governor says first."

"Better stuff up the cracks, Welch," warned one. "He'll crawl out through them."

The punchers left the room.

"Good night, Fatty! Don't forget to ring if you want ice water."

"We'll call you early."

"Sleep tight."

Laughing among themselves, the men departed, heading for their own quarters across the road. Soon the big room was deserted save for Welch and his silent prisoner.

"You come along with me," the foreman ordered, gripping Durkin by the arm.

He led the way to a small cabin that stood by itself among the cottonwoods, passing within a few feet of where Osborne was crouching. This cabin was not occupied except when extra help were employed. The windows were high and small, and rows of bunks were built against the walls. While the other houses were lighted by electricity—a convenience that Truxton did not deny his men—this one had never been wired. Welch pushed his prisoner in and struck a match. He found a candle, lighted it, and gave it to Durkin.

"Pile into one of these bunks," he commanded, "and don't go looking for trouble. As long as you behave yourself you'll be treated right."

The expert glanced dubiously around him, at the earth floor, the high windows, and the rows of bunks.

"Is it—just possible that I might see Mr. Truxton to-night?" he asked. The prospect of sleeping in such a place did not appeal to him.

"No, it isn't possible," Welch returned. "The boss has a bad leg. Got it chasing you, too."

"But—but I assure you," began Durkin.

"Now, look here, friend," the foreman interrupted, "you can't see Truxton to-night, and that's final. You've sprung enough jokes for one night; save the rest for morning."

With this Welch turned on his heel, went out, shut the door, and fastened it with a padlock. Then he walked away to his own quarters.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

FROM where he was hiding, Osborne had been able to see through the bunk-house door, and view this last scene between Welch and Durkin, although he was not near enough to overhear any of the conversation. He watched the foreman come out and lock the door, but made no attempt to change his position until long after Welch's footsteps had died away. The punchers at the other cabins did not appear to be a sleepy lot, and gave no evidences of retiring. Their laughter and, now and then, a bit of a song was borne upon the quiet air. Once Osborne heard a violin, and again a mouth organ.

"A cowboy cabaret," he murmured, catching the refrain of a popular song. The tune had been a favorite on Broadway when he left, two months before. It had traveled two thousand miles in that time. But Osborne had become hardened to these surprises. East or West—Broadway or the Truxton Ranch—it was all the same. The line between them had long since been obliterated.

When the song was finished, Osborne brought his mind back to the problem he had yet to solve. At present it did not look very difficult. Durkin, locked up, could do nothing until morning. Even then, if Osborne had his way, nothing would happen. He couldn't afford to let anything happen.

Once he had reviewed the situation and checked up its many points, he began to lay his plans. He slipped along in the shadows until he reached the bunk house where Durkin was held a prisoner. By the time he had maneuvered near enough to apply an eye to a crack below a window, the Denver expert had, to all intent, taken the foreman's advice and retired, for the interior of the cabin was dark.

For an hour or more Osborne remained there, waiting patiently until all

sounds from the other cabins had ceased. The moon sailed up in a cloudless sky; the stars paled before it. From a distance came the lonely cry of a coyote.

When he had satisfied himself that the last puncher had taken to his bunk, and that the mouth organ was put away, Osborne stepped warily to the bunkhouse door and examined its fastenings. The padlock couldn't be picked—that much was certain—so the amateur sleuth gave his attention to the staples that held the short iron bar in place. These seemed very secure—at least they would not give under his fingers—and he told himself that they were probably sunk deep in the door, and clinched on the inside.

To meet this predicament Osborne was compelled to return to the automobile he had left in the road by the hedge fence. He rummaged through the tool box until he found a stout, pointed bar, used for removing tire casings. Possessed of this, he hurried back, falling into an irrigating ditch on the way. He floundered wildly around, making enough noise to arouse the entire ranch, but luckily no one heard him.

Using the bar as a lever, he succeeded in prying loose one of the heavy staples. This took considerable time and patience, since he was forced to labor quietly; but the wood proved softer than he expected it to be, and, once started, the staple pulled through easily.

"So far, so good," he announced. "Now for the interview."

He opened the door just wide enough to slip inside the room, and closed it softly after him. Then he stood with his back against the wall, until his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom. The moonlight sifted down through the high windows, and in this faint glow Osborne made out the dim form of Durkin lying on one of the bunks.

He tiptoed across the earth floor and shook him. The sleeper awoke with a start, and lifted himself to his elbow.

"W-what's wanted?" he asked, gazing blankly around the unfamiliar room.

Osborne answered him. "Keep quiet. You're all right. I'm going to help you."

"Who are you?" He peered into Osborne's face; then, as recognition came, he cried: "What are you doing here? Did they lock you up, too? Where you been all this time?"

"Not so loud," Osborne cautioned. "I haven't been locked up. I got in to help you get out."

Durkin sat up in the bunk. The mere thought of escape stirred him to action. "You'd better do something!" he declared. "You got me into this mess. What's it all about, anyhow?"

"We won't waste time in explanations," Osborne said; "it's too late for that. I'm going to take you to Cheyenne; you can get to Denver from there. But before I do that we must come to an understanding."

Suspicion gathered in Durkin's eyes—that is, in the one visible eye; the other had swollen until it was closed.

"Look here," he said, "I'm in a bad fix. Things couldn't be much worse. I'm half starved, and I'm wet to the skin, and I'm going to have a devil of a time convincing those fool punchers that I'm innocent. But I want to tell you, right now, that before I'll touch that safe I'll stick here and take the consequences. If you think I'm going to be a cat's-paw, you're badly mistaken. So, if that's what you mean by an understanding——"

"Nothing of the kind," Osborne broke in. "That incident has ended. What I want you to do is to forget you ever heard of the safe, or the Truxton Ranch. I want you to forget you took the ride with me this afternoon. I want you to forget you ever saw me."

"Forget?" Durkin groaned, feeling tenderly of his scratched head. "Just give me the chance. I'll forget everything if I can get safely back to Denver."

"Good! Then the matter is settled. You'll be home in time for breakfast."

"You—you're not going back to Denver in that infernal racing car, are you?" Durkin asked.

"Not much. I've had enough of that.

I'll take you into Cheyenne. There's a train out at five o'clock."

Durkin stood up and moved his arms slowly, painfully. "Lead the way; I'm ready."

The pair slipped out of the bunk house. Osborne shut the door behind them, and took the trouble to press the staple back in place. He had no trouble in noiselessly forcing it back through the soft, rotten wood.

"What you doing that for?" Durkin asked.

"I'm going to give the boys a mystery to solve," Osborne replied. "It'll puzzle them to find how you got out; they may not discover that the staple is loose."

Followed closely by Durkin, who groaned at every step, Osborne led the way from shadow to shadow. Now and then they crawled along the hedge, avoiding the lighted parts of the lawn; they jumped the ditches and made their way through the flower garden. It took them ten minutes to cover the hundred yards between the bunk house and the road where the machine awaited them. Then, just as they were about to step into the car, the sound of hoofbeats on the hard road reached their ears.

A man on horseback suddenly appeared ahead of them. His hat was gone, and he swayed from side to side in his saddle. Osborne had just time and presence of mind enough to pull Durkin down, when the man passed. He must have seen the car, but apparently it did not interest him, for he rode on without stopping. That he was employed on the ranch seemed probable, for he turned in at the gate and headed toward the corrals.

Osborne, catching a full look at the stranger's face as he passed, smothered an exclamation.

"What's the matter?" asked Durkin, clutching his arm. "Has he gone by?"

"Yes; he's gone." Osborne straightened with a frown. "I've seen that fellow before. And it wasn't in this part of the country, either," he added thoughtfully.

"Great guns!" came from Durkin. "You don't—don't suppose he could be the sheriff, do you?"

"Of course not. This fellow belongs on the ranch—one of the punchers, I should say."

"What's he doing out here at this time of the night?"

"Well, he has probably been in Cheyenne—had a night off, and wanted to make the best of it."

"He was loaded, all right," Durkin said, his mind easier now. "It's a mystery to me how he ever stuck in his saddle."

"Lucky thing for us that he had a few drinks aboard," reasoned Osborne. "Otherwise he might have been curious to know what this machine was doing in the road."

With the man's face photographed vividly in his mind, and still puzzled as to where he had seen him before, Osborne climbed into the seat and sent the engine spinning noiselessly. Durkin got up beside him. The car moved slowly up the road. Once the ranch had been left behind, Osborne advanced the throttle several notches, and turned on the lights. When they were over the first hill, and were dropping straight down into the city, he opened the throttle until the speedometer needle was up to the forty mark.

Durkin, who was in a cheerful frame of mind now, confident that he was beyond all danger of pursuit, and that he would soon be home, suddenly stiffened in his seat. A lump came into his throat.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, in a quavering voice, as this new cloud enveloped him. "I—I can't go home!"

Osborne swerved his eyes from the road ahead long enough to get a flash at the expert's dismayed face. "Why can't you?" he asked, mentally conjuring up another stumblingblock.

"I—I forgot about the wife," Durkin explained. "Forgot everything about her."

"Don't let that worry you," Osborne said consolingly. "You've had enough on your mind in the past few hours."

"But—but what'll she say to my staying away all night?"

"Tell her you had an important business engagement in Cheyenne," suggested Osborne readily. "That's partly the truth."

Durkin shook his head sadly. "Sure—I can tell her that, all right," he admitted, "but is she going to believe it? I ask you, will she believe me? Just wait until she gets a peek at this colored lamp of mine—and at this scratched dome—and at this once perfectly good suit." He groaned at the prospect. "I should have stuck at the ranch. I'd rather face a hundred of the punchers than Emily. I think I'll go back."

"Oh, nonsense," protested Osborne. "You're all right. You're better off than you think. Just suppose your wife heard you had been arrested? Suppose your name had been in all the papers? What would she have thought then? You're a lucky man, and you don't know it."

"But how am I going to explain?" Durkin asked, cheering a trifle at Osborne's remarks. "A fellow don't get in this condition on a business trip."

"You'll not be in this condition when she sees you," patiently argued Osborne. "You're coming with me to the hotel. We'll get in the back way without being observed. There you can get rid of your muddy clothes and slip into the bathtub. I've a suit that's too large for me—it ought to fit you. After that we'll see the doctor—he's a friend of mine—and get him to patch up your eye. You'll be as fit as a fiddle before dawn. Then, when you get home, you can tell Emily you were in an auto smash-up, and were lucky to escape with your life. She'll be so tickled to see you she will forget all about the cross-examination."

"I don't know about that," Durkin began dubiously. "Emily's no green one. She caught me in a couple of stories before, and if ever a woman is suspicious, she's that one. She'll start asking questions, and I'll go right up in the air; always have, and always will. I think she possesses second-sight. Can't slip anything across on her. I—I think I'd better go back to the ranch. At least when I'm there I'll have proof I was in the mix-up. I can explain to Mr. Truxton. He'll surely understand."

"Hold on, Durkin," cried Osborne. "You're forgetting our agreement. If I got you away from the ranch you were to be afflicted with a loss of memory."

"I know, but——"

"No excuses, now. You're going right back to Denver. You'd be an ass even to think of going back to the ranch. Truxton is hot-headed and unreasonable, and it's ten to one he wouldn't listen to your explanation. Besides, if I didn't show up, where would your proof be?"

Durkin mentally weighed the pros and cons of the situation, while the car was bearing him into the city, and decided, just as they drew up at the rear door of the Plains Hotel, that it would be better to accept Osborne's counsel and return to Denver. Now that the whole affair had passed he was made to realize how thin and absurd his arguments would sound; and without evidence to sustain him, who would take stock in his explanation? While he did not relish the prospect of facing Emily, it seemed better to face her than a possible sentence, or to have the affair reach the newspapers.

In an hour after the two gained Osborne's room, Durkin had discarded his clothes, taken a shower, and donned a suit that, while a trifle too small, would serve its purpose until he got home. It was a bit long in the sleeves, and tight around the waist; the trousers were almost too snug for comfort, and Osborne warned the wearer not to stoop suddenly or to take too long a stride.

After hurriedly scanning the timetables, it was discovered that the Denver train went through Cheyenne at four o'clock, instead of five; so there was a scramble for the station, a slap on the back, a cheery good-by, and William Durkin, representative of the Merrill Safe Company, was borne away into the night.

Osborne watched until the winking red lights on the rear coach had been

swallowed in the gloom, then heaved a great sigh of relief and walked back through the deserted streets to the hotel. His night of adventure had ended. With all his efforts, nothing had been gained. The door of the Truxton safe was still locked, and the turquoise owl remained in his pocket.

The first heralds of the approaching dawn were creeping up the eastern heavens, but he was too tired, mentally and physically, to marvel at the riot of color that trembled above the distant plains. He undressed and tumbled into bed, and, in spite of a troubled mind, was soon asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

OSBORNE awoke at ten o'clock, with an aching head and burning eyes. He stared at the ceiling of his room for a minute or two before recalling to mind just what had caused the unpleasantness. Then, as the remembrance dawned, he leaped out of bed and hurried under the icy shower. He emerged from it, sputtering and choking, and wide awake.

As he got into his clothes, the phone rang sharply. He answered it, with a quick suspicion that it might be from Alicia. The operator at the desk announced a visitor, and when Osborne caught the name he asked to have it repeated.

"Show him up," he said finally. He put back the receiver and hurried into the rest of his clothes. "What in the deuce is the boss doing in Cheyenne?" he muttered.

A sharp rap sounded on the door; it was opened, and Riker Blumly entered the room. The senior member of the Blumly firm was a short, keen-eyed, colorless individual, who spoke rapidly and nervously, and kept his hands continually in motion. He was over fifty, but dressed in a manner that led one to believe he was touchy on the subject of his years.

He smiled into Osborne's amazed face, and thrust out a hand which the latter pressed. "Hello, Osborne. You look surprised. Didn't you get my wire?"

"No, I've had no wire. It might be down at the desk, though. What in the world brings you to Wyoming?"

"Well, then this will be a shock to you," Blumly continued. "I'm bound for Tientsin. Crossing the continent for a change. Mean to hit Vancouver and take the Japanese boat across." He sat on the edge of the table and extracted a cigarette from a curiously wrought antique case, lighted it, and puffed reflectively. "Was in Denver yesterday, and came up here this morning to make connections with the Overland Limited. It gets in here at noon."

Osborne paused in the act of knotting his cravat. A sudden explanation darted into his mind; he looked at his employer narrowly, but did not utter the words that trembled upon his lips.

"Have a good time out here?" Blumly asked, turning so he could command a view of the city through the window.

"Yes," Osborne answered. "I've had the time of my life. Hilton's here with his car, you know, and I've enjoyed every minute. I hate to think of leaving." He hesitated. "The West is a great place."

"I was just hoping you'd be glad to dig out," said Blumly.

"You mean—I'm to go along with you?" Osborne asked quickly, for this thought had been with him all the time, from the moment Blumly had mentioned sending the telegram.

"You hit it," Blumly said with a laugh. "That's why I wired you from Denver. Wanted to give you a day's warning at least. Got to have you, Osborne. Won't take you long to throw your things together, will it?"

Osborne's heart throbbed uncomfortably fast. "That's too bad," he announced slowly; "too bad. If I had only received your wire yesterday——"

"What are you getting at?" interrupted Blumly, turning to face him. "You don't mean you can't go with me?"

"Can't you make it the end of the week?"

"Impossible! We'd miss the boat."

Osborne's fingers went down to the bulge in his coat pocket. The turquoise owl had to be back in the Truxton safe before he left Wyoming. Alicia trusted him. He was going to prove worthy of this trust.

"I'm sorry, Blumly," he went on, "but I can't go to-day, perhaps not to-morrow."

"Can't?" the other repeated. "I'd like to know why? You're working for me, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've given you two months to play in, and a salary going on all the time. Now I've got important commissions on hand—the biggest I ever had. They'll mean a hundred thousand to the firm—perhaps more. I want you along with me. You know more about the Tientsin district than I do."

"Why can't I follow on the next boat?" pleaded Osborne. "I can meet you in Peking. That'll be all right, won't it?"

"No, it won't be all right," replied Blumly. "My plans are all made, and I can't afford to have them upset. This is business—serious business, only you don't seem to think so. You know when you came here that you were to be prepared to leave whenever I wired. It isn't my fault that the telegram wasn't delivered. I sent it early yesterday morning. Now what's keeping you back?"

"It's a personal affair, Blumly," Osborne answered, "which I can't very well discuss. I'm sorry. But this day, of all the days I have been here——"

"Never heard you talk this way before," interrupted the other. "It doesn't sound like you." He regarded Osborne for a minute in silence. "Is there a girl at the bottom of it?"

"Yes, there is," he admitted frankly.

"Well, I'll be——" Blumly hesitated; then he slid off the table and stood at the window. "I thought you were old enough to have better sense?" he went on. "You, of all men. Is it possible that some rip-roaring, bronco-riding Western girl has made an impression on you?"

Osborne thought of Alicia, smiled, and did not reply.

"Well," continued Blumly, "if the girl is of more consequence to you than your business, we'll let it remain so. What is it to be? Will you go with me, or will you stay here?"

"Meaning, I presume, that I must choose between the girl and the job?"

"That's it."

"Finding the right sort of job, Blumly, is rather difficult," he answered calmly; "but it doesn't compare to the difficulties one is put to in finding the right sort of girl."

Blumly glared, made as if to speak, apparently changed his mind, picked up his hat from the table, and started toward the door. As he reached it he turned and spoke.

"So that's final, is it?"

Osborne nodded. The door slammed; Riker Blumly stalked down the hall and punched savagely at the elevator button. As for Osborne, he stood in the middle of the room, thoughtfully stroking his chin. Suddenly his eyes lighted up, and he snapped his fingers. There had come to him vividly, like a picture flashed upon a screen, the recollection of an incident that had troubled him the night before. The unexpected appearance of his employer had brought a solution.

In a bound he was across the floor, and had opened the door leading into the hall. Blumly was still waiting for the elevator.

"Oh, Mr. Blumly!" Osborne called.

The senior partner looked around. "Hello," he answered, and came back to meet the other. "Changed your mind, have you?"

"Not at all," Osborne responded. "I just happened to recall something. Remember the crook we caught in the New York shop one night, two winters ago? Remember we came upon him just as he was about to get away with the contents of the safe?"

Blumly frowned. "Why, yes, I recall it," he said slowly, wondering what had brought such a recollection to Osborne's mind.

"Wasn't he a slim chap, with a big

nose, and funny, squinting eyes?" Osborne continued eagerly. "And didn't he have a finger missing from his right hand?"

"Yes, that's the fellow. He was known to the police as 'Spider' Smith. Had a bad record, so they said."

"What happened to him? I went out of town the day following his capture, and never thought to ask when I got back. Was he sentenced?"

"He got five years, I believe," Blumly said. "Why?" he added, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Five years," Osborne repeated. "That would make it just about——" He stopped, conscious that he had been thinking aloud. "Oh, nothing, Blumly; much obliged. I'll come around and see you when I get back to New York."

"You needn't trouble yourself," Blumly returned shortly, as he stepped into the elevator, and the steel door clanged behind him.

Osborne laughed and went back into his room. This time he took the owl from his pocket and held it out in front of him, balanced on the palm of his hand.

"Look here, you little lump of blue mud," he murmured. "Do you know you're a jinx? Well, you are! I thought, yesterday, you were a running mate to a lucky Billiken, but you're far from it. You're the original trouble maker. You've probably been making it unpleasant for some one since the day you came out of the kiln; and you're still on the job. Men have been hunting you for centuries, praying that they would find you; all have suffered, and many of them have died—and some have done murder—just to get a squint at that ugly head of yours. You've upheld your reputation in the past twenty-four hours, all right. And now I've said good-by to a six-thousand-dollar job because you happened to be in my pocket instead of in Truxton's safe. But you're going back, birdie. Do you understand that? Does it seep through that turquoise glaze? You are going back into the safe to-night. And, what's more, your owner isn't going to know a thing about it."

He held the image up in the sunlight and watched the play of color in the body glaze and the points of fire that gleamed in the rough-diamond eyes.

"You beauty," he murmured—he was the entranced connoisseur once more; the troubles that had passed and the troubles that were to come were forgotten. "I wonder what old Blumly would have said had he known you were in my pocket all the time?"

With a sigh he put the owl back into its former resting place.

"Now," he said grimly, "I'm cast to play a part that is a happy combination of Sherlock Holmes and Raffles." He reached for his hat and went out of the door, whistling. "The curtain's up, and I think my cue has been spoken."

CHAPTER XII.

MORE DANGER.

THE plan that had formed so suddenly in Osborne's mind now held out such alluring promises of success, that the late agent of Blumly Brothers, of Fifth Avenue, New York City, hurrying through the lobby of the Plains Hotel, viewed the prospect with increasing satisfaction. If it carried through—and the chances were hopeful, indeed—the turquoise owl would once again rest in the Truxton safe, and the ranchman would be none the wiser. The only thing threatening the plan was the disturbing possibility that Mr. Truxton might not have been as badly hurt as first supposed; and if he felt much concern over the contents of his strong box he might venture down into the library despite all his daughter could do to prevent him.

With only this one cloud to worry him, Osborne went directly to the garage on the adjoining street, where the *Blue Streak* had been quartered the night before. He had left orders with the man in charge that the car was to be given a thorough overhauling and washing, and was pleased to see, as he entered the garage, that these orders had been carried out. The big machine fairly shone after a scrubbing. The dust and dirt had vanished, the glass

sparkled, the brass and nickel gleamed like new, and the broken windshield had been replaced. It was difficult to realize that this shining car had passed through such a desperate, record-breaking adventure.

While Osborne was complimenting the man on his good job, and slipping him a wink as well as a bank note, Hilton came in. He seemed immensely relieved at the sight of the car, and turned to Osborne with a curious smile.

"Well, here you are, eh? Decided you had skipped town. What happened? Thought you only wanted the car for an hour yesterday?"

"I had an unexpected errand to do," Osborne explained, which, after all, wasn't so far from being the truth. "Didn't think you'd mind——"

"Of course not," Hilton broke in. "I didn't give a hang. Only I was worried about the car. You're no expert, you know. I was afraid you had taken Miss Truxton for a joy ride, and landed in a ditch."

"I got along pretty well," Osborne returned.

"I'm taking a party into Denver today," Hilton continued. "How would you like to come along? Bring Miss Truxton, if you like. It'll be a treat for both of you. They say the roads are like glass, and the constables all but blind."

"Sorry," responded Osborne; "I'm engaged for the day."

"I might show you a little real speed," Hilton said. "You'd be surprised to see how fast this car can go. I've made fifty-five miles an hour without half trying. I'll wager she'll do sixty-five if you let her out."

Osborne smiled and pretended to be adjusting a screw on the windshield. "Is that so?" he responded.

Hilton nodded. "It takes a pretty good man to drive a machine at that speed, even if I do say it myself."

He climbed into the seat and started the engine. "Which way are you bound, Osborne? Truxton Ranch, as usual?"

Osborne admitted that the ranch was his destination.

"Well, jump in. I'll take you out there. Don't have to meet the folks for an hour or so yet."

They ran slowly out of the garage, with Hilton at the wheel, turned from the paved streets into the wide boulevard that wound through the residence section of the city, and headed across the rolling plains in the direction of Fort Russell. Treeless and barren, drenched under a torrid noonday sun, the prairie lay on each side of them like great billows changed to sand. Prairie-dog mounds, and wide-spreading, spine-leafed yucca plants, with their slim stalks of dead-white, waxy blossoms—beautiful to look upon, but destitute of odor, served to relieve the monotony of the scene. Clumps of wild sage made gray splotches against the eternal yellow of the burned and curled buffalo grass.

As the car swept past the fort the occupants saw the cavalry at morning drill. The thunder of hoofs, the tinkle of spurs, the clank of scabbards, the sun flashing on the sword blades, and the admirable precision with which men and beasts alike went through their maneuvers, although witnessed many times before, brought an exclamation to Osborne's lips.

"Great work, isn't it?" he remarked. "Those fellows are the best riders in the country, even if this is the West, and the home of the cowboy."

Hilton laughed. "Cowboys? Bah! The moving-picture people have corralled all the punchers who can ride or throw a lasso. And the automobile has taken the place of the bucking broncho. Why, they were playing polo in machines out here a year before the East imagined such a thing was possible."

"And where have the bronchos gone?" Osborne asked. "I haven't seen one since I've been in the State."

"No; and you won't until August. The ranchers who possess such rare and valuable examples of horseflesh keep them under cover. On Frontier Day, when you're paying a dollar to sit out on a hard plank in the broiling sun, the bronchos will appear. They'll be ridden, probably, by the son of the

rancher who owns the beasts. He's attending an Eastern college, and is back on the old homestead for his vacation. He will hurry around to a costumer's, if he can't find what he wants on the ranch, and array himself in a complete outfit—chaps, boots with spurs and four-inch heels, corduroy shirt, bandanna handkerchief, and sombrero—in order to give the spectator the proper sort of 'color.' Why, if a stranger from somewhere east of the Mississippi came here during the celebration and saw a civilized man in civilized clothes riding a broncho, he'd rush for the box office and demand his money back."

Osborne laughed. "Couldn't blame him, could you?"

"Maybe not. Of course it's the people who pay their dollars who are to be pleased. If they demand color you've got to give it to them."

Osborne accepted these statements for what they were worth—rather inclined to believe them, however, since Hilton had interests in the State, and was a frequent visitor.

"Speaking of local color," Hilton resumed, "reminds me of a funny incident. Last year a troupe of moving-picture actors came to Cheyenne, intending to locate here and establish a permanent studio for the making of Western films. The first day the manager went out, looked around at the different ranches, and came back disgusted. The next day he gathered up his company and took the train back to the East. He said he could get more Western color and better-looking Western men in New Jersey than he could in Wyoming."

Osborne looked doubtful. "That's a pretty big story to swallow," he remarked; "but as long as you seem to believe it——"

"It's a fact," asserted Hilton. "The clerk at the hotel told me, and he ought to know. The picture troupe stopped at his house."

"All right, we'll let it go at that; but if I'm here during the frontier celebration, I'll find out a few things for myself. You seem to have a perpetual grudge against this country."

"Guess I've cause enough," Hilton declared shortly, as he released the clutch and allowed the car to coast down a long hill.

"I think you're like the rest of us Easterners," Osborne said. "You came out here expecting too much; I know I did. And because the West did not live up to the reputation given it by red-blooded fiction, and the films, and the plays you saw on Broadway, you're disappointed and sore."

"Nonsense," Hilton answered; but as he sank back in his seat and did not attempt to continue the argument, Osborne felt that he had carried his point.

At the Truxton Ranch—a welcome spot of green in the surrounding yellow plain—Osborne got out of the machine, while Hilton turned the car around and, with a nod, shot away in a great cloud of dust.

"Jove!" muttered Osborne, as he stood in the road gazing after the *Blue Streak*. "If Hilton thinks to look at the meter he'll wonder how his total mileage happened to jump two hundred miles. Then I'll have to come across with an explanation."

Alicia, who saw his arrival from an upstairs window, hurried down to greet Osborne as he came along the gravel path. He waved to her as she stepped upon the veranda, and she wigwagged back; and, as she was smiling, he concluded any news she might have must be good.

He quickened his pace and lightly vaulted the veranda rail. "What of the night, watchman?" he asked, in a melodramatic whisper.

"All's well at the Truxton castle," she answered.

"And the owner of the turquoise owl?" he continued.

"He's in bed, and the doctor says he must stay there for two days."

Osborne sank into a deep wicker chair and fanned himself with his hat. The high hedge, the irrigating ditch, and the flower garden below the veranda recalled unpleasant memories of the night before.

"Does your father know I was here

last night during the rumpus?" he asked.

"I don't believe so. I never told him, and I don't think Welch or any of the boys thought to mention it," Alicia responded.

"It's just as well, I suppose," he venturned. "The fact that I appeared on the scene during the height of the fuss might have looked suspicious to him."

"If any suspicion was attached to you," Alicia declared, "it has been forgotten in the new excitement."

"What's that?" Osborne was quick to ask.

"Remember the thief they caught last night?"

"Yes."

"He escaped!"

"No!" Osborne cried, in pretended surprise.

Alicia nodded. "Yes, he did. It seems Welch locked him up in one of the empty bunk houses," she went on to explain, "and this morning he had disappeared."

"And how did he manage to get out?" Osborne asked, eager to learn what the punchers thought of the affair.

But before Alicia had the opportunity to continue, Welch, the foreman, came around the house. He would have passed along, had he not caught sight of Osborne. He nodded and walked up to the lower step.

"Hear the news?" he asked.

"Yes; Miss Truxton has just told me. How did your prisoner get away?"

Welch shook his head gloomily. "I found the padlock in place," he admitted, "and had to unlock it in order to get into the house. We thought at first he had crawled through a window, but that was impossible. Then I examined the door, and found where a staple had been forced. The prisoner couldn't have done this himself, so there's just one thing certain."

"What's that?"

"The fellow had a confederate."

Osborne whistled softly and looked genuinely surprised. "Well, what do you know about that!"

"The confederate probably hung around, saw where his partner was quartered, and, after we were all asleep, pulled the staple."

"That's probably about what happened," agreed Osborne.

"Of course I'm to blame," Welch continued. "Should have known that most crooks work in pairs. I ought to have turned the prisoner over to the sheriff last night instead of waiting."

And if he had, thought Osborne, there would have been the deuce to pay. Aloud he said: "You're positive you caught the right man?"

"Oh, yes; no doubt of it," confidently replied the foreman. "We pulled him out from under the hedge, and found a bullet wound in his forehead. Pretty damaging evidence, don't you think?"

Osborne nodded.

"You should have heard his story," Welch went on, grinning at the recollection; "he told a bird. Said he had been driven from Denver in an automobile; even went so far as to admit he came here to open the safe. Believe he said his name was Martin, or Durkin, or something of the kind. Insisted upon seeing Mr. Truxton; said he could explain everything. He must have changed his mind during the night."

From a corner of his eye Osborne saw that Alicia was paying very close attention to what the foreman had to say.

"Why, I thought you were going along with the men?" she said, addressing Osborne. "You told me you were when you left the house."

"No, I didn't go with the boys," he replied, which was the truth, for he followed them instead. "Changed my mind when I got outside," he continued. "Took the car and went on to Cheyenne."

"Well," the foreman said, "you missed a lot of fun."

On the contrary, thought Osborne, it was Welch who had missed all the fun. He was hoping the foreman would leave, so he could explain the situation to Alicia before she made any damaging remarks. Finally Welch did start away; but the moment his back was turned, and Osborne began to

breathe easier, a half dozen punchers appeared at the corner of the house. Sighting the foreman, they called and headed toward him.

One of the number—a slim puncher whom Osborne instantly recognized as the belated rider of the night before—carried something in his hand; and, approaching Welch, he held out for his inspection a long iron bar. "Here," he said. "Take a look at this."

Osborne's heart gave a violent jump. The bar was the tire replacer he had taken from the tool box—the instrument of Durkin's release—which he had left behind him.

"Where'd you find this?" the foreman asked.

"In back of the empty bunk house," the other responded. "And the point just fits the marks on the door."

Welch shook his head slowly and turned the bar over and over in his fingers. "So the fellow used a tire replacer to pull out the staple, eh?" He peered closely at the flat end of the replacer. "Here are some initials."

Osborne felt a chill race up and down his spine. "Initials?" he repeated faintly. "What are they?"

"Three H's," announced Welch.

"The replacer don't belong to any of the cars on the ranch," the slim puncher ventured to assert. "And we haven't been able to figure out what them three H's stand for?"

"Why, they're the owner's initials, of course," the foreman said. "If we can find out where this replacer came from we'll have a likely clew."

Alicia, who had been paying the closest attention, and had even insisted upon handling the replacer, suddenly exclaimed:

"Those are Mr. Hilton's initials!"

Osborne tried to signal her, but failed.

"Who is Hilton?" Welch demanded.

"Why, he's a friend of Mr. Osborne," Alicia explained.

"Got a car, has he?"

Osborne nodded. As it was no longer possible to keep this matter under cover now, he concluded the best he could do would be to explain.

"It was his car I had here last night," he said.

The foreman broke into an exclamation. "By thunder! The thing is clear now. The fellow broke into the tool box on the car while Mr. Osborne was here at the house."

Every eye turned to Osborne now. Outwardly calm, inwardly wondering how this bit of evidence was to terminate, Osborne allowed a frown to wrinkle his forehead. "I shouldn't wonder if that is what happened," he said slowly.

"Did you notice whether the tool box was opened or not?"

"No, I didn't."

"This replacer belongs to your friend, doesn't it?" the foreman continued.

"Yes, I suppose so. Hilton is in Denver to-day."

Welch pondered over the situation for some time. The men joked among themselves and passed the "makings" around.

"Maybe we're not on the right clew, after all," the foreman said finally. "If Mr. Osborne went back to Cheyenne immediately after he left the house, as he says he did, I don't see what object this confederate had in taking the replacer. He didn't know then that his partner was to be locked up."

"Perhaps he wanted it for a weapon," suggested Alicia.

"Not likely." Welch shook his head. "These crooks are always armed. Although I will say," he added, "the fellow we caught didn't have a sign of a gun on him."

"He got rid of it before we nabbed him," one of the punchers declared. The others chimed in with this opinion.

"That's about it," Welch agreed. "Now suppose you boys scatter, and give the lawn and the hedges a thorough search. If you find anything let me know."

When the men had departed, Welch took the replacer and put it in one corner of the veranda. "We'll keep this here for future use," he said. "I don't think there is much hope of catching the fellows, but if we do, this evidence may be needed."

Now that his pulse was once more normal, and the threatened discovery averted—for the present, at least—Osborne called to mind a certain other affair that had puzzled him. During all of the excitement of the past night, and through all of the unpleasant interview this morning, the memory of a face had troubled him.

"By the way, Welch," he began, with simulated indifference, as the foreman left the veranda and started down the steps, "were any of your men in town last night?"

Welch stopped and looked back, apparently surprised at the question. "Why—yes, I believe so. Three of the boys were off duty."

"Who were they?"

"Let's see—there was Middleton, Hemert, and Johnson."

"What is the name of the slim puncher who handed you the replacer a moment ago?"

"That's Hemert."

"Been here long?"

"Oh, offhand, I should say about six months. He's a green man, or, rather, he was. But he is getting along well now. A little too strong for booze, but as long as it doesn't interfere with his work I'm not kicking."

"Where's he from?"

"California. Interested in him, are you?"

"Thought I had seen him before," Osborne said, not making a direct reply. "But I guess I was mistaken. The man I knew lived in New York."

Welch sauntered off in the direction of the bunk houses, while Osborne, forgetful of the girl, chuckled aloud. Alicia watched him in silence.

"What's so funny?" she asked at last.

"Oh, several things," he answered. Then he grew serious. "Anything the matter with your eyes, Miss Truxton?"

"I don't think so."

"You didn't get my signals—my wireless messages?"

"Oh, were you trying to signal me?" she asked. "I couldn't imagine what you were doing."

"I wanted you to keep quiet," Osborne explained. "After what Welch said it should have been clear to you that the man the boys caught last night was Durkin, the safe expert I brought from Denver."

"I surmised as much," she answered.

"Still you had to inform Welch that the replacer found back of the bunk house belonged to Hilton."

"Doesn't it? The initials are——"

"Of course," Osborne broke in. "But I dropped it there."

"You?" The girl stared at him in amazement; then, as the situation dawned upon her, she broke into a quick laugh. "Then—then you're the confederate."

Osborne nodded and smiled. "I'm the guilty party."

In as few words as possible, Osborne told Alicia the whole story, from the time he had left her in the hall, to the placing of Durkin safely aboard the Denver train. She listened to him with a widening smile, and broke into a laugh when he mentioned Durkin's fear of "Emily."

"Poor fellow," she said, when Osborne had finished. "He'll have a difficult time explaining to her, I'm afraid."

"I suppose so," Osborne answered; "but we would have had a far more difficult time explaining if his story had reached your father's ears."

She nodded. "I wonder when our little comedy of errors will end? Who would have thought so simple a thing as the closing of a safe door would bring about all this trouble? Well," she added, after a period of reflection, "we've the rest of the day before us. Father will never stay away from the library another day. He has asked me a dozen times about the safe. He will never be easy until he assures himself that the turquoise owl is unharmed."

Osborne set his lips grimly. "The owl is going to be back where it belongs to-night," he declared.

Alicia eyed him with a dubious smile, not in the least impressed with the announcement. "You were just as confident that it would be back last night," she told him.

"I tried hard enough," he argued.

"Of course you did. But you played in hard luck."

"I made a success as a speed demon, and a rank failure as a cracksman. It's a wonder I didn't leave my card attached to that replacer. I think Welch suspects," he added.

"Why?" she asked, in sudden alarm.

"Oh, for several reasons. I appeared so unexpectedly during the excitement last night, for one thing. And the finding of that replacer puts me in a bad light. We all know that an ordinary crook wouldn't break into a tool box in search of such a weapon, especially before he knew his partner was to be locked up. Now if Welch learns that the car didn't leave the ranch until after midnight——" He broke off with a shrug, allowing the girl to form her own conclusions.

"If Welch does suspect," Alicia replied, "I'll tell him the whole story—the truth. He is bound to see our side of it, and I'm sure he won't inform father."

"All right," Osborne said; "but don't do any explaining until it is absolutely necessary."

"As long as you are so confident of returning the owl, I don't see why either of us should worry any more," Alicia observed. "Still, you haven't told me how you expect to accomplish this," she added. "Going to bring another expert?"

Osborne made a grimace and held up his hands. "Never again!"

"Perhaps you intend to blow open the safe?"

He shook his head. "It's going to be opened in the regular way."

"Do you think you have the combination?"

"I won't need it," he said.

"Well, if you're not to force it open, or you don't know the combination, or you don't need to know the combination, will you please tell me how this feat is to be performed?"

Osborne sat back in his chair and stared out over the prairie, to where the heat waves danced in long, wavering lines. He pondered over a certain matter for a considerable time before he answered the girl. "You may be needed," he said at last; "I can't tell yet. But I want to see you again at seven o'clock, here on the veranda."

"And what am I to do until then?" she asked.

"Just make sure your father keeps in his room."

"That will be easy," she said. "Father seems quite willing to obey the doctor's orders."

Beyond these instructions, Osborne refused to enlighten the girl as to what he intended doing, or what part she was to play in the coming drama; and plead as she would, she derived little satisfaction from his evasive answers. He left the veranda, after consulting his watch, and walked across the lawn to where the men were combing the hedges in search of the weapon Durkin was supposed to have thrown away before being captured.

CHAPTER XIII.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

OSBORNE, conscious of the delicate and responsible mission he had projected for the afternoon, proceeded to lay his plans with all possible care and concern. He could not afford to stumble when so far advanced on the course; and while he felt almost certain as to the outcome, the thought of a possible hitch in the details kept him worried. He did not like to keep Alicia in the dark concerning his plans, but under the circumstances he felt that it was for the best. Once the preliminaries had ben attended to, she should know.

He walked along with the men, speaking to one and another, and after considerable maneuvering singled out Hemert. He had begged the makings of a cigarette from one of the punchers, and, after rolling it, asked Hemert for a match.

The slim puncher removed his sombrero and handed him a match from the row that were tucked in the hatband.

"Found anything yet?" Osborne asked, in a matter-of-fact voice, shielding the flame of the match with his

palm, and looking over his hand into the sun-browned face of the puncher.

"Not yet," Hemert answered. "I'm thinking the fellow dropped the gun in the ditch."

"Where was he captured?"

"I don't know exactly. I wasn't here last night."

"Oh!" Osborne seemed surprised. "Missed all the fun, did you?"

Hemert grinned, showing a double row of white and even teeth. "I had fun enough," he said, "but it was a different kind. You see, I was in town with a crowd of the Diamond B boys, and didn't get back here until after the excitement was all over."

They talked for a time over the capture of Durkin, his escape, and the probability of his being recaptured. At last Osborne deftly turned the subject to one that was more personal.

"Welch tells me you're new in this business," he said, in an offhand way.

Hemert's eyes flashed, and, figuratively speaking, bored Osborne through as clean as a steel-nosed bullet. "Yes," he answered slowly, "I guess I'm what they call a tenderfoot, when it comes to punching cattle."

"Like it?"

"Yes; it's a bully life."

"The West is a great place, isn't it?" Osborne observed. "So vast and boundless. Nobody cares who you are or where you came from. You're taken for your face value, and just so long as you behave, just so long the West's your friend. You've not lived here many years, have you, Hemert?" he added, after a pause.

"Why?"

"I don't know." Osborne evaded a direct reply. "There's something about you——"

"I'm from California," Hemert broke in swiftly.

"Wouldn't like to go back, would you?" Osborne asked. "Back to California?"

The puncher gave his questioner a level, steady glance. In his gray eyes lurked curiosity and suspicion. Osborne's topic of conversation was not exactly relished. "I don't think there's any chance of my going back there again," he said at last.

"No?" Osborne smiled. "One can never tell, you know."

By this time the two men had drawn away from the others, and, walking on, unconscious of their direction, now found themselves back of the low sheds and corrals, apparently alone. Once this situation was made clear to Hemert, he whirled and stepped close beside Osborne. So close he was, in fact, that Osborne saw the twitching of the muscles in his brown neck.

"Look here, friend," he began, "I've answered all your questions; now you answer one of mine. What do you want to find out about me?"

"Nothing," Osborne frankly responded. "I know enough. I just wanted to see how many lies you could tell."

Hemert stepped away and broke into an imprecation, while his hand went back toward his hip. Osborne did not change his position, but continued to regard the other with a half-amused glance.

"Hold on," he said; "forget the gun play. This isn't a scene from a Western drama, or a page from a novel. You're not a bad man, and I'm unarmed. Just hear me out. I want a talk with you."

"Suppose I don't want to talk?" replied Hemert grimly.

"You will, so never mind supposing," Osborne retorted. "And, by the way, you needn't keep your right hand out of sight all the time. I know there is a finger missing from it."

The puncher dropped his hand to his side and watched Osborne with glowering eyes.

"When you handed me that match a while ago," Osborne continued, "with your left hand, I noticed your thin, flat finger tips. I also noticed, when you moved your left arm, you unconsciously winced, as if it pained you."

Hemert made no reply.

"You really ought to take lessons in geography," Osborne resumed. "New York City isn't in California."

The puncher was breathing hard

now. "I don't know what you're getting at," he said finally.

"Oh, yes, you do. Let's be sensible and understand one another. You never saw California. You came to Wyoming from New York—not from the city, but from a little place up the river where the State gives free board. You left in a hurry, and so far you have neglected to inform the warden as to your new address. It wasn't the right thing to do, Spider Smith, because you were supposed to stay at your boarding house for five years, and——"

With surprising swiftness Hemert had plucked a revolver from his hip pocket, stepped beside Osborne, and held the weapon close against his ribs. But Osborne, although he broke off in the middle of a sentence, did not look or feel perturbed.

"Oh, don't get melodramatic, Smith," he said mildly. "Somebody might see us, and think we are quarreling. And you mustn't get excited over what I have said. It's the truth. You know it, and I know it."

"You think you know a lot," the other returned. "Your fairy tale isn't interesting. Just suppose you turn around and march back to the house!"

"Oh, no," protested Osborne; "I haven't had my talk yet."

"You've talked enough," retorted Hemert.

Taking advantage of an unguarded moment, Osborne's clenched fist descended suddenly upon Hemert's wrist. With a cry he stepped back, while the revolver went sailing through the air.

"There, that's better," said Osborne. "Now you can pay more attention to what I have to say. In the first place, Smith—your name is Smith, isn't it?—your face is one that is hard to forget. I saw you in New York City, two winters ago. Recollect? I saw you again last night. Have you ever seen me before?"

The puncher gazed steadily into Osborne's eyes. "No," he replied. "I never saw you before until to-day."

"Think hard," said Osborne. "You attempted to pull off a little job in New York City two years ago, and if it hadn't been for me you might have succeeded. Remember that?"

Hemert shook his head.

"No?" Osborne smiled. "Well, I'll jog your memory. You opened a safe in the office of Blumly Brothers—did a very neat job of it, too—and were about to make an exit when I came in. We had an argument, a rough-and-tumble fight, and were both pretty well mussed up when the police interfered. You drew five years in Sing Sing, while I got an extra check from the boss for protecting the property. You remember, don't you?"

The faint suspicion of a smile hovered about the puncher's lips. "Since you have made it so plain," he said, "I do remember. But you've had your mustache shaved off."

"Yes! Now we are beginning to understand one another. You served two years of your term, and probably because the meals didn't suit, you left. Is that right?"

"It'll do, if it is just the same to you."

"So you came West," Osborne went on, as if repeating a story that had been told to him, "took a new name, and concluded to lead a new life. But I imagine it grew monotonous. Your fingers were never meant to coil a lariat; they're far too sensitive. They started itching last night. You got permission from Welch to leave the ranch, bound for Cheyenne. Halfway there you remembered that your employer had a safe in his library, and that it was not carefully watched. You began to wonder if your fingers had lost their cunning, or if your ears were just as sensitive as they used to be. You decided to test them. But unfortunately other circumstances interfered, and instead of getting into the safe, you got a bullet in your arm, or your shoulder, I don't know which. You managed to get safely away on your horse, and went on into town. There you probably had your wound dressed, and no questions asked. You returned to the ranch about midnight, with a happy little jag, and probably chuckled to yourself when informed

that the thief who had attempted to get into the library window had been captured."

The puncher's eyes glowed with open admiration. "I'll have to hand it to you," he said grimly. "You have the original Sherlock hiding his head. I couldn't have told the story better myself. It would be a shame to lie to a mind reader like you. My name is Smith—Spider Smith, of New York City, and I'm guilty of everything you accuse me of doing. Now what's the rest?"

"The police assert that you are the original finger-tip safe opener."

"I'm well acquainted with the police," Smith admitted.

"You know what I mean, don't you?"

He shrugged. "I can guess somewhere near it."

"Are the police right in what they say?"

"The police," said Smith, "are always right. You can take their word for it or not, just as you please. I'm too modest to blow my own horn."

Osborne's hand slipped down to the bulge that marked the resting place of the turquoise owl. "I shall want you to help me to-night," he said.

Smith looked up. "Doing what?"

"I want you to open Mr. Truxton's safe for me."

The puncher-crook fell back a step or two, and his face clouded. Osborne's blunt remark robbed him of speech for a minute. Finally he spoke. "What did you say you wanted me to do?"

"I want you to open the safe in Mr. Truxton's library for me," Osborne repeated calmly.

"What's the idea?" he asked. "Why should I open a safe for you? What sort of a game are you trying to work?"

"It isn't a game," Osborne replied.

"No? Well, I don't know what else you would call it. I might as well tell you here and now," he added, "I never have worked with a partner, and never intend to. If you want to rob the safe you——"

"Hold on," interrupted Osborne; "you're surmising too much. There is no robbery to be pulled off. I don't want to take anything out of the safe."

"I suppose you want to put something in it?" Smith spoke up.

"That's just what I want to do," Osborne replied.

The puncher looked skeptical. "I wonder what the police would say if I sprung that kind of a gag on them?" The laugh that followed suddenly turned to a scowl. Smith's jaw hardened. "Look here," he began, "I've been taking this pretty much as a joke, but it's gone far enough. You know who I am and what I've done, so there's no use bluffing. Don't think for a minute I'm a fool. I'm looking out for myself first, last, and all the time. I haven't had the easiest time getting from the Hudson River to Wyoming, and I'm not going back there very soon. Understand?"

"I admit the request is an unusual one," said Osborne, "and I can't explain because it would involve another besides myself. But I assure you there is nothing wrong in it."

"Then why can't Truxton open his own safe?" proposed Smith.

"Impossible!"

"It looks mighty queer to me," the puncher continued, "and I'm fighting shy of such affairs. I've paid too well for all my past experiences, and I'm not hungering for more, especially when it's a job like this, where there is nothing to gain and everything to lose."

"There will be no danger," Osborne said. "Truxton is confined to his room. To be on the safe side we'll turn the trick during the supper hour. Miss Truxton will undoubtedly eat upstairs in her father's room, and the Chinese cook will be waiting on them. That will leave the entire lower floor unguarded. The safe is an old one, and should be easy for you to open. You won't be in the house over five minutes. I don't think it is too much to ask of you, considering——" He stopped and met Smith's level gaze.

The puncher shrugged. "Oh, I see. You've planned things out remarkably well, haven't you? You've pushed me into a corner, and now it's take what

you give me, or suffer the consequences. Well, you're playing safe. I suppose I would consider most any kind of a proposition before I would welcome the sheriff."

"I don't like to put it as strong as that," Osborne said. "But under the circumstances, I feel——"

"Oh, don't apologize," interrupted the other.

Several of the men were approaching now. Welch came down to the corral and shouted orders, motioning for the man he knew as Hemert at the same time.

"I'll expect you here about seven," Osborne said.

Spider Smith walked over and picked up his revolver. He examined it carefully, and thrust it back into his hip pocket.

"All right," he answered. Without another word he whirled on his heel and slouched over to join his comrades.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST ACT.

THE long, hot afternoon came to a close at last, the dusk hastened by heavy clouds that threatened rain. The punchers rode in from the branding pens, dismounted, turned their ponies into the corral, and raced joyously toward the bunk houses and supper. To Osborne, sitting on the cool veranda, Alicia imparted the comforting information that her father was asleep. The doctor had come during the afternoon, assured the patient he would be up and around the following day, and departed.

At half past six it was dark enough for lights. Alicia set the table, while Chee Sam, singing to himself in the kitchen, prepared the meal. Alicia had decided to eat downstairs, in preference to awakening her father, and invited Osborne to share the repast. He did not need a second invitation.

Osborne was just congratulating himself at the prospect of a good dinner and better company, confident that the turquoise owl was as good as back in the safe, when the sheriff rode in, dismounted, and came up to the veranda. He was a big fellow, with a genial face and a pleasant voice; and no more resembled the sheriff of Western fiction than the Truxton ranch house resembled the home of the moving-picture ranchman. He wore corduroys and boots, but the familiar sombrero was missing, and if he possessed a revolver it had been carefully tucked out of sight.

"Where's your father, Miss Truxton?" he inquired, after nodding to Osborne, and removing his hat as Alicia appeared in the doorway.

"He is upstairs, asleep," she told him. "He has been in bed all day. You heard, didn't you, about the excitement?"

"Oh, to be sure." The sheriff nodded. "I had forgotten about Mr. Truxton. Welch told me this morning. He should have turned the prisoner over to me last night. But we won't disturb your father just yet," he added. "I'll wait here for a while, if I may."

Osborne's heart sank even as he hurried to pull out a chair for the new arrival. To have the sheriff on the scene while the final act of the drama was being played was not exactly pleasing.

"I suppose you came up to see father about the trouble last night?" Alicia ventured to ask, as the sheriff accepted the chair.

"No; another matter entirely. I want to look over your punchers. Thought I had better explain to Truxton first. Got a telegram from New York this morning that a fellow known there as Spider Smith was supposed to be working on a ranch in the vicinity of Cheyenne. Don't take much stock in it, but thought I might as well look around."

Osborne leaned forward in his chair, thankful that in the dusk his sudden start had not been seen. "What's this fellow wanted for?" he asked.

"I don't know; the telegram didn't state. They just wired me his description, and asked to be informed immediately if I made an arrest."

"Oh!" said Osborne. "Did you say you had his description?"

"Yes; he's a slim chap of about thirty-five; has squinting eyes, white, per-

fect teeth, a big nose, and a finger missing."

"That's a pretty fair description, isn't it?" Alicia said. "You should find him if he is in the neighborhood."

"Yes, it is a good description," the sheriff admitted. "Better than usual. How many men have you on the ranch?"

"I really couldn't say," she replied. "Welch can give you all the information you need. All the men are at supper now."

"Perhaps this is a good time to look them over," the sheriff said suddenly, getting on his feet.

Osborne, who realized instantly that if the sheriff caught sight of Hemert, the turquoise owl would not be returned to the safe, prepared to block the proposed departure.

"Have you eaten, sheriff?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, just finished," was the unexpected and disheartening reply.

"Better stay and have a cup of tea," he said. "You'll have plenty of time to look over the men; they won't run away. I was just leaving when you came here, and if you don't stay, Miss Truxton will be compelled to eat alone."

A wireless warning flashed between the girl and himself; and while she did not realize the danger that threatened, she was tactful enough to follow the clew he had given her.

"Of course the sheriff will stay," she murmured. "It was thoughtless of me not to invite him before. But really"—she laughed—"I was so interested in the telegram that I forgot all about eating."

The sheriff smiled broadly, and was lost. "Well, I can't refuse the ladies; never could, and never will. So I'll stay, Miss Truxton."

When the sheriff had been ushered into the dining room, and had taken a chair opposite Alicia, and Chee Sam was hovering expectantly in the background, Osborne, groaning inwardly at the thought of the lost dinner, took up his hat and prepared to leave.

"I'll run along now, Miss Truxton," he said, in as ordinary a voice as he could muster. "See you to-morrow at the fort. We'll play off that postponed match. Good night, sheriff, and good luck."

He walked down the steps and around the house; but once screened by the heavy shadows, he darted swiftly from the path and followed the hedge as far as he could in the direction of the corrals. Arrived there, he found the proposed meeting place deserted. It was considerably after seven o'clock now, he knew, and, as the minutes passed, and no one came, he began to fear that Smith was going to disappoint him.

Then a shadowy form stalked out of the gloom, and Spider's voice greeted him. "I'm ready," he said simply. "Couldn't break away any earlier. We had better be going along, or some of the boys will be interrupting."

"All right; follow me. Miss Truxton has company for dinner," Osborne said—but he did not add who the company was—"so we can't go through the hall. We'll have to get in through the window. I don't believe it is locked."

Osborne was thankful for the clouded sky, otherwise their stealthy progress around the house and across the open lawn would have been attended with more danger; as it was, however, the shadows were friendly, and the two men reached the library window without detection.

The window was unlatched—indeed, throughout all the excitement of the last twenty-four hours, it had been overlooked—and it was a simple matter to crawl through and drop to the floor inside. Osborne led the way, and Smith followed close behind him. Once within the quiet library the two men crouched behind the curtains. The voices of the sheriff and Miss Truxton could be heard at intervals, together with the rattle of silver and china.

Smith took in a deep breath. "I don't like this," he said.

"No use wasting any time," Osborne said, not as much at ease as he would have the other believe. "The safe is there. Now get to work."

Spider cautiously crossed the floor

and knelt in front of the strong box. His fingers went out and found the polished knob. Suddenly he dropped to the soft rug and lay quiet.

"What was that?" he asked in a faint whisper.

Osborne's heart began to flutter, and he listened with bated breath. "I—I don't know," he answered. "I don't hear anything."

Then Smith chuckled and straightened. "Good Lord! It's a cat!"

Osborne drew a relieved breath. More accustomed to the gloom now, his roving eyes made out the vague form of a cat that had jumped up on the window seat and was watching the intruders.

"Good thing it happened to be a cat and not a dog," muttered Smith, leaning nearer the safe.

Absolute silence fell now. The voices from the adjoining room were suddenly hushed. Smith was breathing fast. The faint, almost inaudible click, click of the dropping tumblers could be heard, as the dial went this way and that, obeying Spider's cunning and sensitive fingers. His ear was pressed close against the door. He began counting to himself.

Osborne waited as long as he could. "How is it working?" he asked at last.

"Easy," Smith replied; "dead easy. I'll have it open in another minute."

The clock on the opposite wall struck once—so loud and so unexpectedly that both men started. "Half past seven," Osborne announced, in a weak voice, passing a hand across his damp forehead.

Smith grunted. "There! Here we are." He stopped counting, and his fingers left the knob and went over to the handle. The safe door swung open. At the same instant, as if operated by some hidden mechanism, the library door opened, too.

Spider Smith swore softly to himself, and whirled around. Then, alive to the danger that threatened, sprang to the opened window and disappeared, as swiftly and as silently as a shadow.

Before Osborne could take a second breath—even before he could change his position—the electric lights above him and on every side of him blazed up, and Truxton, clad in a bath robe, stood in the doorway, holding him in astonished survey.

CHAPTER XV.

HOME TO ROOST.

A THOUSAND things passed through Osborne's mind. The sudden blaze of lights dazed him, and Truxton as well. So for a minute the two men stood gazing blankly into each other's faces. Then Osborne, his heart pounding, got to his feet. Mr. Truxton, eyes blazing, his face twitching with both rage and pain—for his injured limb must have tortured him when he walked—moved slowly across the floor.

"So!" he cried. "Caught you, eh? Caught you in the act! I've suspected you all along. I knew what you were up to."

By a trick of fate, Smith, in his hurried exit, had in some manner struck the safe door, and it had closed. The spring caught and held it. When Mr. Truxton reached the safe he tugged at the handle.

"Guess I got here before you opened this, eh?"

"I didn't open it——" Osborne began.

Alicia appeared in the doorway now. The sheriff was not in sight. "Father," she cried, "what—what are you doing here?"

"Doing? Doing?" he repeated. "I'm saving my property. I've just caught this—this Blumly agent robbing my safe. Call Welch—some of the men—quickly—don't let this fellow escape!"

"I'm not going to run away, Mr. Truxton," Osborne replied, calmer now.

Without answering, Truxton gave his attention to the safe. In a minute he had opened the door. As he did so he fell back with an exclamation.

As the door opened there jumped out of the safe the big, black cat which had frightened Smith a few minutes before. The solution of this dawned upon Osborne instantly. For some unaccountable reason the animal had jumped into the safe just after Smith had opened

the door; and when the door was shut it had been made a prisoner.

"You did open my safe!" Mr. Truxton cried, first to recover his speech. "You did open it. That cat couldn't have lived in there half an hour, and—and——" He broke off, hunting feverishly along the shelves. "Good heavens! The owl—it is gone!"

"Father," Alicia broke in, "listen to me. Everything is all right. Let me explain."

"Explain! There is nothing to explain. The owl is gone—my precious turquoise owl—and that man has it!"

Alicia gazed helplessly at Osborne, who in turn realized that the end was near. The only thing left to do was to make clear his intentions.

"I have the owl, Mr. Truxton," he said. "I did not steal it. I have had it since yesterday, and was going to return it when you——"

His voice failed him, and he felt suddenly as if the blood in his veins had turned to ice water. His hand had gone down to his coat pocket, where the turquoise owl had been resting, but the pocket was empty! His hands flew to his other pockets. It was not in any of them. He looked up to meet Alicia's wide, questioning eyes.

"It's—gone!" he gasped.

"Gone?" she cried.

"Gone!" echoed Truxton, who, of course, did not understand this new situation. "Of course it is gone—you took it!"

Osborne was dumfounded. He was positive that the owl had been in his pocket when he left the dining room. Was it possible that he had dropped it somewhere between the house and the corrals? Oh—a startling solution presented itself; and he was on the point of speaking, when a sound in the hall caused the three occupants of the room to turn.

The sheriff, minus his hat, his face flushed, and breathing hard, came into the library, bringing with him—Spider Smith.

"Hello, Truxton!" he cried. "I've made a lucky catch. Happened to be out on the veranda and saw this fellow jump from the window. What's happened in here, anyway?"

"That—that's one of my men," Truxton said. "It's Hemert."

"I'm afraid you've been fooled, Truxton," the sheriff answered. "This is Spider Smith—broke out of Sing Sing prison about six months ago. I just had a telegram from New York to-day about him. The police said this fellow was hiding out on some ranch near Cheyenne, and wanted me to look around."

Prompted by a growing suspicion, Osborne stepped over and dipped his hand into Smith's coat pocket. When his hand came out it brought the turquoise owl. He held it aloft; then walked back and placed the bit of porcelain in Truxton's outstretched fingers. The ranchman received it with a tremulous cry of joy.

"My treasure!" he murmured, over and over again.

Alicia's eyes filled with tears at this happy and unforeseen end of the drama. The sheriff frowned and looked from one to another of the principals.

"Well, what in the dickens——" he began.

"Better ask your prisoner to explain," broke in Osborne.

"How did Hemert get this owl?" cried Truxton, as thoroughly puzzled as the others. "How did it come to be in his pocket?"

Spider Smith, finding himself the center of interest, smiled faintly. "I just naturally helped myself to it," he said. "Lifted it from Osborne's pocket."

"But I don't understand what it's all about," protested the sheriff. "Won't somebody explain?"

"It's a long story, sheriff," Osborne replied, "and Mr. Truxton must hear it first. Afterward, if he is agreeable, you shall know."

"I don't wish to hear any of your stories!" declared Truxton. "I've heard enough. You and Hemert were partners in this scheme to rob me of my treasure. Take Osborne with you, sheriff."

"Hold on," Smith protested. "Os-

borne's no pal of mine. I'm mighty particular who I work with. Osborne got me to come in here to-night to open the safe for him. He had the owl in his pocket. I didn't know what it was at the time, but imagined it was valuable, so I helped myself."

"You say Osborne asked you to open the safe?" questioned the amazed sheriff.

"He wanted to put the owl back," explained Alicia. "Oh, it is all my fault. Don't blame Mr. Osborne. I can explain everything."

The sheriff shrugged his broad shoulders. "Your daughter seems to possess the key to the whole situation, Truxton," he said.

The ranchman, more perplexed than the sheriff, gazed first at Osborne, and then back to his daughter. He was about to speak, when Alicia bent over and whispered something in his ear. What she had to say apparently carried weight, for Truxton looked over to the sheriff and said:

"I'll hear what she has to say, sheriff. You needn't stay any longer. Take Hemert along with you."

"What about this man?" The sheriff nodded toward Osborne.

"I'll be responsible for him," declared Alicia.

The sheriff smiled and bowed. "Very good. That's sufficient. I put him in your charge, Miss Truxton." Then he took Smith's arm. "Come along, partner."

"Just a minute," broke in Osborne. "I think your prisoner has one thing more to confess."

"Eh, what's that?" The sheriff stopped.

"The fellow the punchers caught last night, who got away from them later, didn't happen to be the right one, after all," Osborne explained.

"Oh, it was Hemert, was it?" cried Truxton.

"What makes you believe I was a visitor here last night?" Spider Smith asked, speaking directly to Osborne.

"Why?" Osborne laughed. "You confessed it to me this afternoon. I wormed it out of you. You said——"

"Oh, no, I didn't," Smith interrupted. "You made up the whole story yourself. Thought you were a regular Sherlock Holmes, didn't you?" Smith grinned at the recollection. "That story you made up was so good I hated to spoil it, so I let you ramble on. Because I didn't deny your charges you jumped to the conclusion that I was the guilty party. Well, I wasn't. I was in Cheyenne last night—from six o'clock until midnight—and two of the other boys were with me. Ask them if you want to."

"But—but your arm," Osborne protested, chagrined at this announcement.

Smith rolled up his sleeve and smiled. "Don't see any evidence, do you? Oh, I squirmed, all right, when I was talking to you this afternoon, but it wasn't from a wound—it was from rheumatism."

Osborne seemed dumfounded. "If it wasn't you, who could it have been?" he asked.

Smith rolled down his sleeve. "Well, I'll give you a tip," he said. "Suppose you go into the kitchen and ask the Chinese cook how he got the bullet in his shoulder. I happened to see him fixing a bandage this morning. When he caught sight of me he ducked. I was wise right away, but I didn't think it was up to me to squeal. It's against my code."

Before any of the listeners could reply to this, Osborne, whose eyes had been attracted to the heavy curtains between the two rooms, sprang forward. Jerking aside the curtains he was just in time to see Chee Sam vanish through an open window. The cook had apparently listened to all that had been said, and at the mention of his own name had taken flight. Osborne was preparing to give chase, when Truxton halted him.

"Stay here!" he cried. "Let the Chinaman go. If he's innocent he'll come back, and if he isn't—it'll be good riddance. I've rather suspected him lately."

"He has been acting queerly for the past month," Alicia put in, recalling instances when she had come upon him unexpectedly in the hall. "But I never thought he would do a thing like this."

"He was probably aware of my treasure," the ranchman said, "and wanted to get possession of it. Apparently he knew its value."

The sheriff, who had listened patiently to all these remarks, and who found himself still in the dark, shook his head slowly. "Well," he observed, "this has been a night of mystery and excitement, hasn't it? I guess there is nothing to keep me here now. I'll travel back to Cheyenne with my prisoner. If you should need me later"—his eyes rested upon Osborne again—"just phone me, will you?"

Spider Smith, alias Hemert, who lapsed into silence following his statement, seemed quite ready to accompany his captor. And as he walked out of the room he never once turned back.

When the sheriff and his man had disappeared, Truxton turned to his daughter. "Now, Alicia," he said, "what's your story?"

Alicia began from the first, from the moment Osborne had arrived at the ranch house on the previous afternoon. Mr. Truxton listened without interrupting, although several times his eyes twinkled; and when the girl had finished he put out his arms and gathered her within them.

"How foolish you have been," he said. "But the turquoise owl is safely back, so we need not worry."

"Yes," she replied; "the owl is back, thanks to Mr. Osborne."

The ranchman regarded Osborne with level, inquisitive eyes. "Young man," he began, "I want to apologize for whatever I have said against you in the past. In spite of the fact that you're an agent of the infamous Blumly you——"

"Was an agent," Osborne corrected. "I resigned this morning."

"Resigned! Why?"

"Mr. Blumly came to Cheyenne this morning and expected me to leave with him to-day for China. I refused because—because——"

"Because?" urged the ranchman.

"Because your daughter had placed the turquoise owl in my care. I had promised to return it to the safe. I knew she depended upon me. Had I left the city this morning I would have failed to carry out my pledge."

"And you gave up your position—to help me?" Alicia asked, while a quick color dyed her cheeks.

"I gave up my position," Osborne returned, "because I wanted to make good my word. I think there was some doubt as to——" He hesitated, as if what he had to add was unpleasant. "Mr. Truxton," he continued, "you mentioned Hankau yesterday. May I ask why?"

The ranchman frowned. "The fact is, Osborne," he explained reluctantly, "I have listened to the stories that are in circulation in that part of China. I took them, of course, for the truth. About three years ago, when I was in that city, a certain merchant in High Tau Street had a rare Baluster plate. You were commissioned by your firm to get it. It was a known fact that the merchant refused to sell to you. Several days later the merchant was found murdered in his shop, while the plate had disappeared. You left town suddenly, and the porcelain appeared mysteriously in the Blumly Brothers' store in New York."

"That story has followed me all these years," Osborne answered. "All the evidence was against me. But I was ignorant of the affair until a friend of mine told me of the rumors. It so happened that I struck a bargain with that merchant, and gained possession of the plate just a few hours before he met his death, and I left the city immediately. After I had departed I presume some unknown came to the shop—perhaps to rob—and was discovered by the merchant, with the result we all know. That is the only explanation I can offer. Owing to the peculiar circumstances I was at once suspected."

"It was wrong of me to believe those rumors in the first place," said Truxton, "but I did. And yesterday, when I learned whom you represented, I naturally mistrusted you. But we will let that pass. Any man who will go through what you have in the last two days deserves to be believed."

"Now that everything is happily

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ended," said Alicia, "it seems that Mr. Osborne has suffered the most. He is minus a position, and——"

"And your prisoner," added Osborne.

"Well," Mr. Truxton said, his eyes twinkling as he caught the look that passed between the young man and the girl, "as long as you are the cause of Mr. Osborne's misfortune, Alicia, I suppose it is only right that you should make some reparation." He cleared his throat and tried to look unconcerned.

"If you two will kindly assist me up the stairs," he went on, "I'll let you settle this matter in your own way. I don't think I am competent to render a decision. You'll be able to work it out by yourselves, I dare say."

For Future Ages

IF, several thousand years from now, the scientists of some new race of the earth delve among the ruins of London, and discover the great Egyptian obelisk, "Cleopatra's Needle," which now stands on the Thames Embankment, and whose mate is in Central Park, New York, those curious investigators will find a wealth of material for instruction in the ways of the Anglo-Saxon race. Into the large base upon which the London obelisk was erected were placed the following articles, before it was sealed up for all time:

Standard foot and pound; bronze model of the obelisk, half-inch scale to the foot; copies of *Engineering* printed on vellum, with plans of the mechanical contrivances employed in erecting and transporting the obelisk, together with its complete history; a fragment of the obelisk itself, chipped from it in the process of leveling the base; jars of Doulton ware; complete set of British coinage, including an Empress of India rupee; standard gauge of one thousandth part of an inch; baby's feeding bottle and children's toys; parchment copy of Doctor Birch's translation of the obelisk's hieroglyphics; portrait of Queen Victoria; Bibles in French and English, the Hebrew Pentateuch, the Arabic Genesis, and a translation into two hundred and fifteen languages of the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of St. John's Gospel; a shilling razor; Bradshaw's Railway Guide; case of cigars; some pipes; box of hairpins and sundry articles of feminine adornment; a hydraulic jack used in raising the obelisk; specimens of wire rope and submarine cables; twenty-four maps of London; copies of daily and illustrated newspapers; a two-foot rule; a London directory; a Whitaker's Almanack; and last, photographs of twelve beautiful Englishwomen of the day.

Honor the Birds

A MEMBER of the Boston Society of Natural History reports that he gave a young robin sixty-eight earthworms in one day. A young crow will eat twice its weight of cutworms a day. Think what this means to the gardener. "Could we grow anything at all without the help of the birds?" exclaimed a gardener when told of it.

In the crop of a nighthawk were found five hundred mosquitoes. That bird did the duty of tenscore screens. Think of the discomfort, to say nothing of the disease, he prevented!

In view of these facts, one is almost willing to accept the statement of a well-known French scientist, who has asserted that without birds to check the ravages of insects human life would vanish from this planet in the space of nine years. But for the vegetation the insects would perish; but for the insects the birds would perish; and but for the birds vegetation would be destroyed. Nature has, therefore, formed a delicate balance of power which cannot be disturbed without bringing great loss and unhappiness to the world.

All There

By Harold C. Burr

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

A COSTLY MUFF.

JUST before the elevens fanned out for the kick-off, the captain called his men around him. Paul Mowery never forgot the drawn face of his leader, the earnest way he punctuated his pleading words by smiting his open palm with his fist.

"Remember, fellows," Captain Dockett said, his voice hoarse and his eyes glaring, "no fumbling to-day! When you get hold of that ball hang on to it like grim death. Never let go of it until the referee pries it away. Give us something to be proud of to-night. It's in you; you can do it." He pointed his finger at them warningly, ominously. "But no fumbles! That's all. Now let's go get 'em."

Mowery trotted soberly off to his position, feeling that it would be a truly disgraceful thing to miss a pass or even juggle a punt. All that season wretched handling of the ball had been the varsity's glaring weakness. The coaches had worked hard to eradicate it, but it persisted in cropping out unexpectedly. And now here was the whistle shrilling for the big game of the year, and the fault was still uncorrected. Paul knew that every one of his teammates had vowed to fasten to the leather as if his fingers were held there with glue. But a mere resolve couldn't remedy a flaw in a chap's ability. Mowery was worried, irritable.

He realized that the hardest task would fall upon him. He was the surest man on the squad to send far down the gridiron when the enemy was in possession of the ball. Mowery never missed a tackle in an open field. His arms closed like vises around the pumping legs of flying runners. He was fairly proficient at catching the high, soaring spirals that came twisting his way, but the fumbling epidemic had spread to him. Occasionally he would make a glaring muff. It was the despair of the coaches and the bane of the team.

So Mowery remained in the background at least half of the game, stewing and fuming. He had plenty of leisure to work himself into a case of nervous collapse. Only once in every four tries would the little field general of the other team attempt to advance the ball by boosting it toward Mowery. Then, at the dull boom of the cleated shoe striking the hollow leather, he would race fearsomely under the twist-

ing speck that looked about as big as a pear against the blue. The rest of the time he roved alertly about, watching the distant elevens like a hawk for some runner to break through the wall of the varsity's defense. He grew chilled with the waiting. Then his side would get the ball, and he would forget everything in his frenzy to retrieve the precious yards.

But gradually his fears were dissipated. On the side lines the coaches breathed audible sighs of relief. The team wasn't fumbling to-day. Dockett was encouraging them like a captain inspired, calling to them, slapping them on their backs. The man who missed a signal would fail a friend; if anybody fumbled it would be the unpardonable sin. That's the spirit he instilled. It became as easy to tear that oval of inflated leather from any of them as it would have been to wrench off an arm. They hugged it jealously; they became submerged in the one great need—to hold the ball.

Such combined tenacity of purpose bore golden fruit. Along in the second half the varsity fought its way to within striking distance of the adversary's goal. Then Trenchard dropped back and sent a field goal spinning over the bar for three points. It was the first score of the afternoon. The varsity fanned grimly out for another kick-off, faces expressionless. That old bugaboo of a costly fumble was still before their eyes. The cheering that came from the stands fell on deaf ears. The game wasn't over yet, and not for a minute could the eleven forget its old weakness. It was well to be on guard.

It was mostly up to Mowery now. He felt that his teammates were looking to him anxiously. If he could continue to grip the ball unerringly as he had done his opponents would be held in check. The varsity could play on the defensive, "play it safe." It all rested with him. He kept repeating it to himself, over and over again—that it was up to him. The big responsibility of it rested heavily on his shoulders. What if the worst happened? What if he dropped one of those long kicks, and one of the covering ends of the enemy grabbed it up and ran over the line for a touchdown? He brooded on that dreadful possibility; and that was bad for him.

Twilight was casting its film across the scene. Beyond the fence the tall, gaunt trees creaked dismally in the cold breeze. The crowded stands looked somber in that fading light. The elevens themselves looked like crouching gnomes. The goal posts resembled nothing so much as a bleached skeleton in its white paint. Mowery shook off the feeling of depression resentfully. What right had everything to conspire to unman him? The very crowd sat in silence, sitting in impartial judgment upon him. He was being made a scapegoat.

Suddenly he heard a great, booming sound, exaggerated on his acute hearing until it had the volume of surf crashing on a beach. He looked up mechanically. High up in the darkening ether he saw a black object floating. It might have been a wheeling bird. For a brief second he watched it, frowning. It was getting too dark to play football, anyway. A vast disgust for the game overcame him. Then a frantic shout that came nearer and nearer aroused him to belated action. He glanced hastily that way.

Another young gladiator of the gridiron was tearing toward him, black helmet bobbing. Mowery saw the lavender stripe in the stockings twinkling as the owner dashed at him, yelling as he came. Back of him was a ruck of fallen, tangled men. Still others were crawling to their feet and running like mad toward Mowery. Paul knew what it all portended. Lavender and black were the varsity's colors, and that little chap in the black helmet was tearing back to support him. That speck up there in the sky wasn't a bird at all; it was the ball—the ball he must catch! Dockett, the whole college, had given him a sacred trust to perform. It was the enemy's last despairing kick he must handle. He sprinted to get under it, forcing his protesting muscles to obey his dormant will. He slipped, righted

himself with a suppressed cry of fear, and sprinted on.

The very earth was quaking with the pounding of feet that were bearing remorselessly down upon him. Mowery knew that the second the falling ball lodged against his breast he would be pounced upon ferociously by a savage horde. He could make out the lacing on the ball now. He felt the thudding impact against his breastbone, felt a hot, panting breath right on his cheek. The enemy's ends had covered that kick miraculously. He made a frantic, ineffectual grab. He heard a wild roar, a wild scramble at his very feet. Then he felt foolishly alone. He had muffed the ball.

When he screwed up his courage sufficiently to look, it was all confused to him, unreal. Beneath the varsity goal posts a little pyramid of figures was piled. Other figures were flashing past him in the gloom, helping to swell the size of that blighting mound under the goal. The pudgy little referee arrived, grunting, on the scene, and dived into it headlong, prying it apart. He delved until he got the ball. Then he faced about, and came stalking out toward where Paul Mowery still stood stupidly. The air was alive with flags, but they weren't lavender and black flags.

The referee chased the dazed Mowery peremptorily behind his own goal. That young man stumbled thither with hanging head. He didn't dare look at his teammates lined up under the posts. But he heard his captain choke back a groan. He would have given ten years of his life to prevent that rival touchdown. True, no word of censure was offered him, but that didn't make it any easier.

He didn't have the heart left even to run forward and fling up his arms in a vain, stereotyped attempt to block that goal from touchdown. Blindly he started to take up his formerly honored position in the kick-off formation. But it was Dockett who caught his arm and drew him dumbly but eloquently into a forming circle. All around that circle reeled capering students in the snake dance of victory. Dockett gamely led their wailing cheer for the team that had beaten them. The game was over. And it was Paul Mowery's miserable muff of a soaring punt that had cost his college the victory.

CHAPTER II.

THE OLDER HEAD.

MOWERY reached the comparative seclusion of the dressing room firmly convinced that he would never be able to look his fellow man in the eye again. He had done a terrible thing. The work of months had been undone. It was Dockett's last year, his last chance gone glimmering. He would never get over the bitter disappointment of leaving college without having captained a winning team. It was tough on Dockett, and Mowery alone was to blame; he had failed ignominiously. It wasn't himself alone he had hurt; he had hurt others irreparably.

Still, no one said a word to him. He wished that they would rake him over the coals—teammates, the subs, coaches, trainer, rubbers—all of them. He deserved to be jumped on unmercifully. This way he felt ostracized, no longer fit to associate with his fellow beings. It would be the loneliness of his position that would be hardest for him to bear. He alone was responsible for that defeat. He had brought downright dishonor upon the college colors. Perhaps he might have used kinder words, but he was in no mood to spare himself.

One thing he wanted now that was within reach, and that was to escape. It was left him. That miserable muff would have to be lived down somewhere else. Meanwhile, he couldn't face his classmates day after day—in chapel, on the campus, at recitations. He wouldn't be wanted in the rooms nights when the rest of the fellows lounged around on the sofa pillows and smoked their stubby pipes fraternally. He wouldn't be able to stand the accusing self-consciousness of it all. He would run away and start life all over again under an assumed name.

Abruptly he arose and left the dress-

ing room, stiff-backed, not daring to say good-by to a soul. It would only make him suffer more if they tried to persuade him to stay. No, he would sneak back to his room, pack a suit case, and catch the evening train out of town, using the side streets to reach the station. He fled as if pursued by demons.

The sacred campus was being profaned by a howling mob of celebrating visitors. Mowery made out the charred spot around the hallowed old cannon —relic of revolutionary days—and looked away quickly, a blur of bitter tears in his eyes. But for his awful bungle Dockett would be touching a match to a monster bonfire around that scarred old cannon to-night. But no blaze would light up the sleepy, ancient elms. The college tried to forget defeats as quietly as possible. Here was a defeat it would never forget, condone, or forgive. Mowery groaned in anguish of spirit.

Arrived at his room, he feverishly began to pack his belongings. He hastily flung off his coat, fearful lest his roommate return and catch him before his premeditated flight could be put into effect. Too much luggage would look suspicious. He might be stopped on the street. So out of the closet he took a small hand bag that could be partially hidden under his raincoat. He could send back for his trunk., but he must pack that, too, before he left. He didn't want to give anybody at the college any more trouble.

He was interrupted. A light tap sounded on the door, and Paul straightened as if shot. He had been bending over his open trunk, tremblingly tossing in suits that he didn't stop to fold, shoes with the trees in them still, shirts, sweaters, and a tennis racket. For a space he thought of not answering the summons. Probably the person knocking for admission would conclude that no one was at home, and go away. But he abandoned that as cowardly. He couldn't be made to keep on there against his will.

"Come—come in!" he called doubtfully, facing the door in expectation.

It was McGregor who entered briskly, no less a personage than the head coach himself. That gentleman glanced swiftly, comprehensively around, noted the scattered belongings on the bed; the significantly open hand bag, the yawning trunk. His kindly gray eyes gleamed knowingly. The head coach was no longer young; he was losing some of the sandy hair from off the top of his head, but he had a kindly understanding of youth and its follies.

"Where were you going, Mowery?" he asked cheerfully, helping himself to a seat like the most welcome of callers.

"Away, sir," vaguely answered Paul, not quite sure himself of his destination. "It'll probably be West. The governor used to have some relatives out there."

The coach was nodding indulgently, apparently totally innocent that Paul contemplated anything out of the ordinary. "But why not postpone the trip a while, Mowery?" he questioned casually. "By to-morrow morning, say, you won't feel so much like it, I'll warrant. It's well to consider these big steps carefully, and leave the final decision, perhaps, to older heads. If it isn't too personal, I'd like to have you tell me just why you're leaving college?"

"I—I—well, I can't stay after—after this afternoon."

At that McGregor laughed unaffectedly. "Nonsense, Mowery!" he cried gayly. "But I thought you'd take that little fumble too seriously, and get freak ideas into your head about it and the blighting consequences, so I hustled around to reason with you. After all, it was mostly your temperament that did it. You were under too much of a tension. You got to thinking what an awful thing it would be if you dropped one of those kicks. Well, the tension got too great for you to bear, your nerves began to flutter, and——"

"Don't try to excuse me, sir!" interrupted the young man fiercely. "It was a rotten muff, and I don't deserve pardon. Why, the ball wasn't even a twister! I'll never be the same after this—never!" And Paul sank into a chair and buried his head in his hands, fingers tensely interlocked.

"And yet, while you were mentally all right," went on the unperturbed McGregor quietly, "I counted at least twenty punts you handled faultlessly. You only botched one. That's a very fair average."

However, Paul Mowery wasn't to be consoled by any such sophistry. "It was rank!" he muttered stubbornly.

The coach got out his pouch of tobacco, and prepared to smoke comfortably while he talked. "Mowery," he said, clearing his throat, as if for a long speech, "you weren't to blame at all. It's the way we look on sports in our colleges. We take them too seriously. The desire to win is abnormally developed. It's all out of proportion—the traditions to be upheld, the hysterical mass meetings. I'm against all of it!"

Paul was staring at him in amazement, the personal aspect of it temporarily forgotten. "But surely, sir, you believe in college spirit?" he asked, in awe, shocked at this open treason.

"Yes, of course; but it's played up too strong." The blue smoke wreaths were curling about the coach's head like drifting gauze. "Here's your own case, for instance. Your imagination had been inflamed until you looked upon the winning of that football game today as the biggest thing in life. You'd have gladly made any sacrifice to hold that last kick."

"I'd have given a leg!" declared Paul passionately.

McGregor seemed pleased at that admission. "Of course you would," he said, as if clinching an argument; "so would I—twenty years ago. But I've outgrown that abnormal point of view. The older you grow the less you care about trifles. When you come right down to it, what's a football game, anyway?"

"It's something mighty fine!" burst forth the younger man enthusiastically. "Why, it helps to make men of weaklings, teaches self-restraint, rounds out character! It helps to prepare a fellow for the battle of life that follows."

"But, after all, it's only a game—only playing at real life," said the coach carelessly. "Out in the world, Mowery, you'll find that being able to hold onto a football at a critical stage of a game isn't going to help you very much. Why, some of the best men who ever donned the moleskins are failures in business!"

"Better to fail once than twice, anyway," doggedly mumbled Paul, under his breath.

But McGregor wasn't through with him yet. "After all, it was a little thing you did to-day when you lost that game for us. But if you turn tail now and run away you'll always be remembered here as a coward who couldn't stand the gaff. You'll ruin your college career. Yes, it was a little thing, I'm telling you, but all the same you've got to conquer it, not flee from it. Isn't there something that will help you to stay? Some day something will happen to you that will open your eyes. You'll get the proper perspective, the right values. You think now that you've been tested and found wanting, but you haven't."

"I wish I could think that way, sir," said Mowery wistfully.

"You will in time," said the coach positively. "Think, Mowery; think hard! Isn't there something, somebody that you owe it to as your duty to stick, somebody that you'd be sorry to disappoint by leaving? Your father, for instance? He must have plans for you when you are graduated."

"I'm an orphan, sir," said the other, looking about him in harassed manner. "But there is some one—else."

The coach unexpectedly rose to his feet and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "Good!" he said, because he had heard all that he wanted to hear. "Mowery, I won't pry into your affairs farther, but my guess is that it's a girl. Well, there's the door, and that clock on the mantel says you've got just about time enough to catch the last train out of town to-night. I won't interfere if you're still set on going. But if you sleep on it you'll stay for good. Which is it, Mowery?"

Slowly Mowery lifted a pair of trousers out of the yawning trunk, suspenders dangling, and hung them up in the closet. Then he came back and kicked

the hand bag into a corner of the room, grinning constrainedly. It was a good sign—that grin.

"It's a bet, sir!" he said frankly, holding out his hand diffidently. "And thank you for showing me what a fool I've been making of myself. You were very patient."

CHAPTER III.

CROSSING THE RUBICON.

AFTER the coach had taken his departure, satisfied, Mowery felt that he was on the verge of taking a new lease on life. McGregor's common-sense lecture had mitigated the enormity of the football man's offense somewhat. Perhaps, after all, he wasn't wholly a lost soul. This looking at a serious game like football in the light of "sport for sport's sake" was a new wrinkle to him, but it was worth a trial when advocated by an old football star. Then it might be that he would one day get his chance to wipe out the butter-finger work. He told himself, with clenched hands and tragic expression, that he would live for that. McGregor himself had hinted that there would be a "come-back" for him. Well, he would look forward to it. He began to feel better.

Everywhere, he was quick to discover, he was shown the greatest consideration. None of the fellows discussed football in his presence. He was invited out just as before, and made to feel generally that he was the plaything of hard luck. The muffer's heart was grateful to overflowing, but he didn't want the sympathy of the college. What he craved was the undergraduates' respect, their confidence. He was going to try hard to win back those things. Still, a year was a long time to wait. It never occurred to him that his opportunity to redeem the past would come elsewhere than upon the gridiron.

When the first sharp sting of what might have been had dulled to an intermittent ache, he began to think of the girl. It was she who had kept him in college unknowingly. He had heard that women always understand. In the old days his mother had ever been the final refuge, but when a boy takes off his knockerbockers and dons long trousers his troubles are told to a girl—if she will listen. Christine Cowles paid strict attention to all that Mowery said, but she was clever actress enough to appear bored; she knew how to keep up appearances of that sort.

Christine was called eccentric by her fashionable friends, but that might have been because she turned her adorable nose up at afternoon teas, and took to hospital work. It was really her stepfather who drove her out of her home, and it was on account of her Brother Gerald. Gerald was a wild young blade. She had earnestly tried to reform him, but she lacked her stepfather's coöperation. He had humored Gerald in all his high-rolling ways, and persisted in letting him overdraw his large monthly allowance. He settled debt after debt that the reckless young man had contracted. He didn't seem to care for anything but his club and his bridge. He was a weak old man, with money enough to throw to the sparrows.

But Christine was a sensible girl, and one evening she took her stepfather sharply to task for his lax methods. He squinted at her vaguely, and said something about letting the boy have a good time over his wild oats. She persisted stubbornly that she didn't want to see a brother of hers make a cad of himself; there was the family pride to consider. Then the talk had grown hotter, more acrimonious. Miss Cowles was a girl of impulse and spirit, and liked to have her own way; she wouldn't be talked down.

That night she tearfully left the roof of her stepfather for good. She took up trained nursing at the Cosmopolitan Hospital. She was spunky, and she meant to support herself unless her stepfather humbly apologized and used the hand of restraint on Gerald. But her foster parent had apparently dismissed her from his shallow mind. That's how much he cared for his wife's daughter.

Gerald's swift pace was the talk of the college. He was in Paul Mowery's

class, but Paul wasn't bragging about it. He was a frail youth, with an arrogant air that made him disliked. The fellows in college, who, through accidents in birth, didn't own their own machines he treated with a condescending disdain. Mowery despised him cordially, but was sorry for him on the girl's account.

When Mowery had first got the unfortunate relationship fixed, he wandered around with the quixotic notion that perhaps he would be called upon to "sacrifice himself on the altar of his love." He had read that telling bit of word painting in a best seller. Here was the plot he dreamed of—beautiful girl, dashing hero, scapegrace brother. That was the cast of characters. Hero takes up I O U's of penniless brother, incidentally preventing him from blowing out his brains rather than face a prison term. Girl misunderstands hero's noble motive to save brother from disgrace. She tears off engagement ring, flings it at his feet, declaring she will never be a gambler's wife. Hero suffers in silence, curly black hair turning gray in a night. Girl learns the truth by accident, dissolves in tears at hero's feet.

But all that was in his freshman year. As a matter of fact, his romance had progressed staidly. He had sent her candy and flowers, and taken her to unexciting class dances. They had quarreled, but like true lovers had made up when he sheepishly admitted that he was a brute. Not a word of actual love had passed between them. Paul would have felt foolish in making such an avowal, and Christine—well, it wasn't her place. Maybe she liked him the better for his reticence. Yet a tacit understanding seemed to exist between them. It was as if the formal announcement of their engagement was being held in abeyance until he was graduated. Neither thought it absolutely necessary to speak of a foregone conclusion.

But here was a serious barrier springing up. Paul thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't sent her tickets for that fatal game. She had been on duty in the hospital. Notwithstanding that, she must have heard of his wretched muff. He had lowered himself in his own eyes. He had no longer the right to ask a girl like Christine Cowles to marry him, but he wasn't quite willing to give her up. He would compromise; he would put it up to the woman as better men before him had done.

So he went around to see her about it, prepared to hear the worst. One stipulation, however, he would insist upon: He would give her up on probation only—if she got to talking like that. He had made up his mind to redeem himself when another football season rolled around. If he realized that a reconciliation with his girl hung in the balance the very sun itself could fall out of the sky, and he wouldn't drop it—but he would like to be wearing rubber gloves. A break with the girl would act on him as but an added incentive. He would never muff anything again in his life.

Mowery had telephoned ahead that he must see her on important business. She came into the little reception room of the hospital office, lovely in her blue-and-white striped uniform.

"Paul!" she cried hurriedly. "I've only snatched a second off. The house surgeon will be perfectly furious if I'm not back in time to accompany him on his rounds. And I've temperatures to take, and beds to make, and my page of 'Materia Medica' to study. I'm dreadfully busy! What on earth is it? Couldn't it have waited until I'm relieved at seven o'clock?"

It was a minute before he could bring himself to say it. "You've—you've heard about it?" he finally gasped wretchedly. "My—my fumble cost us the game! It was inexcusable. I'm a failure, Christine!"

She sat on the edge of a sofa, as if ready to fly at the first warning that she was wanted. "Paul, Paul! Shame on you, sir!" she said severely, shaking a finger at him. "Did you think I'd care about a silly old football?"

"But it's what it stands for that you've got to think about, Christine," he reminded her inexorably. "It just signifies that I failed in a crisis."

She looked up at him serenely. "And granting that you did fail, as you insist with such a long face—what then?"

"Why—why——" he stammered, bewildered. Then he grasped what she meant to convey. "You'll—you'll still marry me, Christine?" he gasped wonderingly. At the open declaration he had never before uttered he blushed outrageously. "That is—I should say —— Oh, hang it, Christine, what's the use? I do love you! But, after this—well, I'm not asking anything in return."

Evidently this slip of a maid was trained in other arts than nursing. "Paul, don't be so woebegone! Of course I'll marry you! What woman wouldn't marry a failure? It must be dreadful to be the wife of a paragon that never makes mistakes. I just couldn't stand it; I love to sympathize with people."

Despite the open door that led into the public hall, Mowery kissed her. "I may not know much about holding a football," said the now bold and brazen man, "but I guess I know how to hold you, Christine!"

He would have held her in his arms, but she retreated into the hall, suppressing a happy little scream of mock fright.

CHAPTER IV.

SAME OLD STORY.

CHRISTINE COWLES was a young woman who must have her own will above all things. What she set her heart upon she usually got at any cost —to herself. Not that she was a shrew —she was just a little headstrong and a little spoiled.

Mowery was young, and suspected the presence of neither of these traits of character—at first. Their initial quarrel, in which he had sweepingly confessed himself at fault, had been a wrong beginning for him to make. It served to make her think that he would be as potter's clay in her hands. But she was quickly disillusioned.

It was at the midwinter junior prom in the gymnasium that the break occurred. Mowery had been dancing with another girl, and that might have made Christine want to exercise her hold upon him. Paul started to explain that it was only his roommate's sister, but she broke in upon his apology with a merry laugh, and led him triumphantly off to a cozy corner.

"Now get me some sandwiches and cake," she commanded royally. "Please hurry back, dear, because I want to have a serious talk with you about Gerald."

He moved off to obey, looking very big and broad-shouldered in his evening clothes. Had he but hung onto that punt the previous fall he would have been a social lion that night. As it was, young fellows nudged pretty girls, and told again the story of his miserable muff in regretful whispers. The girls said it was a shame, and looked after him in sweet melancholy. Presently he was back with his hands full of good things to eat and drink.

Christine gave a little cry of pleasure, and clapped her hands. "Oh, good!" she exclaimed, spreading the napkin on her chiffon overskirt of black over lavender that she wore in honor of her future husband's Alma Mater. "Now we're all perfectly comfy." Suddenly her face grew pensive as she daintily nibbled at a thin triangle of bread and lettuce. "Paul, dear, I wish you'd speak to my brother."

"What about, Christine?"

She colored delicately. "He's—he's such a spendthrift," she said equivocally. "It's impossible for me to get him to behave. But you're a man; he would listen to you."

Paul stirred uncomfortably. "I'm afraid he wouldn't be inclined to take it in good part, little girl," he objected dubiously. "He doesn't like me any too well. He might think I was trying—well, to boss him."

"But somebody's got to boss him," Christine said, eyes filling unexpectedly. "He's weakening his constitution with his late hours. When he is graduated he won't be fit to take up his work in the world. Almost any examination he is liable to flunk. He simply won't

study. Then there's always the chance of expulsion in disgrace."

"It's tough," said Paul awkwardly.

Christine crumpled the paper napkin nervously. "Paul, I—I love my brother almost as much as I—I love you," she continued. "I had hoped that college would make a man of him. But this wild streak—oh, Paul, he isn't bad at heart! If he would only listen—if he only would! He's just got the bit between his teeth. He thinks it smart to have his fling. Won't you do something —for my sake, dear?"

It was hard to refuse her. "But what can I do?" questioned Mowery helplessly. "He'd tell me to mind my own business, most likely; I'd be made to feel ridiculous. It isn't quite my place, either, to preach to him. Your stepfather——"

Christine had stiffened in her camp chair primly, looking at the fidgeting young man in frank disapproval. "Then you refuse to help me in this?" she asked coldly through white lips.

"It isn't so much that, dear—not that at all!" he burst forth uncomfortably. "You don't understand my position—what you're asking. Your brother and I don't speak when we meet. That's because we've got nothing in common. I believe in clean living, and he—well, you know what he goes in for, Christine. Why, dear, if I should go up to him and start in to correct him he'd laugh in my face. I'd lower myself. I'll do anything else to help you that is——"

"But not this?" she interrupted sharply again, with rising inflection, thinking of that other girl he had danced with, and that he ought to be punished for that. "Very well, Mr. Mowery; I'm sorry——"

Paul had been staring moodily at the pulley machine on the wall. At that ominous title she gave him his eyes flew back to her, startled. Her hands were folded composedly in her lap. She was looking up at him impersonally. It was a strained situation, that required the utmost caution, but Mowery was too young, too impetuous himself, to cope with it without disaster.

"Christine!" he cried anxiously, puzzled, "what have I done?"

She tossed her yellow crown of hair imperiously. "Nothing; it's what you haven't done, what you won't do, for —for me. Please let's not discuss it further. I'm not going to get down on my knees and beg. What you do for me you must do gladly or not at all."

"Christine!" he cried again, this time reprovingly. "I'll do something to open your brother's eyes to what a fool he's making of himself. But you must put yourself in my place, and see that he'd resent anything I said to him. It would only serve to make him go the pace harder. You must see it, dear!"

The girl's lip curled in scorn. "Please don't bother to do anything," she returned, with icy indifference. "You're afraid of him, afraid of being laughed at. Oh, yes, you are. You've owned up to it. Now I'm beginning to understand why you couldn't hold that football."

"Christine!"

"It's useless!" she said wearily, snapping her fingers. "It will do you no good to stand there, casting about for excuses. You can always find them. Oh, there goes Ted Norcross! Won't you be kind enough to call him for me, Mr. Mowery? I want him to take me home!"

That settled it. Paul, without another word of protest, stumbled blindly after his rival of former days.

CHAPTER V.

OPPORTUNE GOSSIP.

MOWERY had no heart to remain for the rest of the dancing. Christine went whirling around the floor on Norcross' arm until poor Paul's head swam at the sight. She seemed totally oblivious to him, enraptured with her old swain. He went stalking into the coat room directly, and got angrily into his belted ulster.

It was his sudden wild desire to take a steamer for Africa to shoot big game, and never see her again. Only his black guide, crouching beside him at his

lonely camp fire in the heart of the jungle, would guess his secret. Then she would be sorry. She would have driven him from civilization, from his fellows. He would die a hermit, a rusty rifle beside him. Nothing would be found in his simple hut but her faded picture with its falsely smiling face. It would be a fine revenge for him to take.

Around and around the campus he tramped, sticking close to the old wooden fence. The clock in the chapel tower struck one, but he didn't care. He would stay out there all night and get ill from exposure, and she, the heartless, the faithless, would repent and come to nurse him. That was just another way of making her sorry.

Over at the gymnasium the music had ceased its seductive strains. From out that squat, ivy-covered building an intermittent stream of young people was pouring, laughing and happy. Their voices floated distinctly across to the lonely watcher by the fence. The lights, shining through the high windows, winked out, one by one. Mowery heard the janitor closing up. He wondered bitterly which of those linked couples, slowly wandering off, was his girl and the obnoxious Ted Norcross.

Then he laughed discordantly, and went off to bed. It was getting chilly outdoors, and dew was falling.

Mowery reacted quickly from any calamity. It was a short jump from the depths of despair to the heights of optimism. By morning he was busy speculating on ways and means of winning back Christine Cowles. No apology would make her forget all about this quarrel. She wanted deeds, not words, this time. That she was unreasonable was beside the paramount question. She wanted Paul to save her brother, but he couldn't make himself mawkish by putting his hand on that brother's shoulder and asking him to repent. He must evolve some other plan. He would have to prove to Gerald that he was making a fool of himself, but that was easier said than done.

His roommate came unexpectedly, providentially to his rescue. That young man chanced to be the most popular member of his class. He went everywhere socially, and heard all the campus gossip. No crowd was so exclusive that it wouldn't welcome him with open arms. Among his several talents he could pick rollicking ragtime out of the most ordinary banjo, could tell a story in whimsical fashion, and was good at "getting up things." When Mowery was deep in study under the student's lamp his roommate would come leaping up the stairs, fling himself headlong at a sofa pillow, punch it into position for his head, and cross his knees, prone on the couch. Then he would regale Mowery with all the latest news of the college world. Sometimes Paul would grunt, uninterested, but on the night in question he closed his textbook with a slam.

"Heard some awful scandal over at Dug Wolf's this evening," his roommate began tentatively, expecting to hear the customary growl. "It seems that the hospital crowd of sharks is trimming your prospective brother-in-law to a fadeaway. Heard the rumors?"

That was where the book slammed. "No, what's up?" asked Paul, trying to suppress his eagerness.

The roommate, thus encouraged, warmed to the recital. "I got it all from that Dungalee chap, but it's authentic. He loves Gerald Cowles with several yards of reverse English attached. He won't warn him about the kind of a brace game he's stacking up against, depend upon it!"

"What's the idea? Start at the beginning."

"It's this way: Dungalee got his from that gang himself."

"What gang?"

"That crew of sporty medicos over at the Cosmopolitan Hospital. It's a poker crowd that meets off hours downstairs for a quiet little game with lead-pipe accessories. It's made up of ambulance internes, orderlies—all the underlings of the staff. It's run off pretty quiet in the stable part of the building, I hear."

Mowery had heard something, in a roundabout way, about those little

parties. "What's Cowles doing among those cutthroats?"

"Curiosity, in the first place," explained the well-posted roommate. "Now he's sore, and is out for revenge, but he'll be picked clean of all his feathers. The game isn't on the level, Paul."

"You've got proof of that?" Mowery started to his feet excitedly. He had thought of something.

The other laughed confidently. "I've got Dungalee's word, and that of half a dozen other chaps who heard him. The plant is so simple it's a wonder Cowles hasn't dropped on it. Dungalee did the second night; but he's a little fellow, you know, and didn't want to start any rough-house or anything he couldn't finish. He just kept away. Now they've got Gerald hooked."

"How is it worked?"

"Well, in the first place, Dungalee says they haven't got much light, afraid of being spotted and losing their jobs." Mowery's roommate lighted a cigarette, and blew smoke at the ceiling. He kept punctuating his remarks with a snapping match box. "The sucker is always made to sit with his back to a thin partition. Just at his shoulder is what looks like a knot hole with the light streaming through it. If he remarks upon it before he sits down he is told that it is a light from the stableman's living quarters that he sees through a piece of defective boarding, and it's the truth, too."

Mowery was an absorbed listener, drinking in the words avidly.

"That ray, in reality, is made to act as a sort of signal. To understand what I mean you must bear in mind that the room is dark. Well, just behind Cowles' chair, concealed by a screen, is stationed a chap in his stocking feet. He tips off the victim's cards simply by placing his thumb over that knothole. Dungalee says he felt the fellow inadvertently breathing on his neck, and that made him suspicious. You see, the system of cheating is modeled somewhat after the old Indian signal fires. It isn't very elaborate—just blotting out the spot of light once for a flush, twice for a straight, and three times for a royal, and so on. Pretty slick of our esteemed medical friends, eh?"

Paul was doing some swift thinking. "Pretty rotten, I'd call it," he said absently.

"Of course, it's none of my funeral," declared the roommate righteously. "But I thought that you—that you—well, for your girl's sake, you know, and all that sort of thing."

"Thanks, old man!" Mowery gripped his chum's hand silently. "I'll attend to it."

"What are you going to do?"

Mowery got up, stretched, and gathered his memoranda together. "Old man," he said flippantly, "some dark night I'm going to bust up that little party in the cellar of the Cosmopolitan Hospital. Meanwhile, let's hit the hay. I've been boning away since supper; I'm all in."

Mowery, long after he heard his roommate's snores beside him, was still wide awake, lying on his back still as a mouse, watching the moonlight weave shadows on the ceiling with the rustling trees' branches outside the window. Those branches creaked in the night wind, but his usual lullaby was no sedative to-night. He had enough to think about. The gods were very kind to him, and he meant to show his appreciation in a substantial way. What if Christine knew of her brother's nightly gambling right under her nose, so to speak? That might complicate his task. If she should catch him prowling around the hospital grounds some dark evening it was conceivable that she might think he was there to annoy her. Well, he would have to risk that.

Since that night of the junior prom he hadn't laid eyes on her, but he wasn't worrying, because he knew what would bring her back to him. He would have to get after Gerald. And here was his chance made to order for him, thrust at him. He must embrace it without delay.

He fell asleep hazily speculating what his girl would say when Gerald

thanked him in her presence, the repentant tears streaming from his eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

A PRIVATE RAID.

THE Cosmopolitan Hospital was an ancient, red brick building, standing well back in spacious grounds, and shaded by sedate old elms. On a certain evening when there was no moon, a lurker might have been seen skirting the shrubbery that bordered the adjoining estate. His collar was turned high, and his slouch hat pulled low. He would have passed for a burglar if it hadn't been for the stylish ulster, belted at the back, that he wore. Cautiously as a cat he worked his way around to the back of the building. He was a trifle nervous about the watchman. It would be rather disconcerting to be shot at as a common thief with his girl withing hearing. On impulse he paused and looked up at the top windows of the dark, looming building. A railed wooden balcony ran along the front. That formed an ideal sun parlor for the babies of the maternity ward. Paul sighed and could only guess if Christine Cowles was on duty. He was acquainted with the hospital rule for nurses. It was turn and turn about—sometimes night work and again day work. He shook himself and went doggedly on, crouching low. He had some work himself that he was neglecting.

Arrived at the back, he rested on one knee, still in shadow, and looked over the prospect. He was facing the stable portion of the hospital. Flush with the ground were the wide doors that swung open for the ambulance. On each side, low down, were rows of windows. He wondered if he could effect an entry through one of them. They glowed faintly yellow, as if from some light far in the basement of the building.

Mowery dodged—close to the ground and on the balls of his feet—into the shadows of the towering brick wall. For a while he crouched there, getting his breath. Cautiously he raised his body and tested the window under which he crouched. He didn't half like this clandestine method of effecting an entrance, but there was no help for it. He couldn't very well send in his card to the poker players.

He pushed at the window sash, and there was a faint, rasping noise. He continued, very softly, to raise the window by pressing his hands hard against the frame, and shoving upward. It gave with well-nigh soundless friction that pleased him. But a quantity of dust was dislodged, and got in Mowery's nostrils, and he caught his breath once, caught it again, and—sneezed! He dropped flat on his stomach, and waited in fear and trembling while that sneeze boomed around the world. But he heard no scurrying footsteps. He wasn't told grimly to throw up his hands. After a while he got gingerly back to his feet, and climbed through the open window. Behind him he carefully shut it, making no noise. He was in the dark now, but he drew a long breath of relief. He had covered his tracks and felt safer. But he was sorry he hadn't brought a pocket electric lamp for this emergency. He did the next best thing—stood perfectly still until his eyes grew used to the darkness.

Gradually he was able to make out objects dimly. He was apparently in a makeshift storeroom. On all sides he saw great piles of barrels and boxes. He groped this way and that, advancing a step at a time, fearful lest he stumble over something with a clatter in the gloom. All the while he kept one hand cautiously out in front of him. Unexpectedly that hand closed on something round, smooth, and cold. It was a doorknob. He executed a careful turning movement and pushed. The door opened, as if his touch was magical. He stepped through it.

Here the light strengthened. He felt, rather than saw, that he was in a vast space. Then his eyes flew around to discover why the darkness was appreciably dispelled. It was a riddle easy of solution; no riddle at all; the sound of low voices guided him. A great smear of flickering yellow light etched

out vividly a picture in the gloom for him.

He saw men gathered around a pine table whereon stood a kerosene lamp. He counted five of them, cards in their hands, chips at their elbows. The light wavered, and he saw a slim young fellow bending feverishly across the improvised gaming board.

Gerald Cowles' face was white and drawn. He spoke thickly, like a man who has been drinking heavily to bolster up his nerve. Over his shoulder a tiny point of light showed. Cowles took up his cards as Paul watched, sorting them tremulously. At intervals after that the light was blotted out. It was plain that the lamb was losing heavily. Another killing was coming off.

Mowery stood in the background and watched the players for a while. One was in white duck, coat open, handkerchief knotted around his neck, and smoking a cigarette. Another wore eyeglasses that he forever kept readjusting with long, snakelike fingers. Still a third was very quiet and phlegmatic. The fourth was burly and red-faced, and he continually growled at his bad luck. All four of them furtively watched the fifth member of that little poker party—Gerald Cowles. The fifth plotter was represented by a dark, motionless shadow.

The football man had seen enough to prove the charges he would make. He instituted a cautious retreat, meaning to return again with reënforcements. But the Fates willed otherwise. No more had he started backward than what was evidently an empty box tripped him noisily. Instantly he heard a cry of alarm at his elbow. He felt a throttling hand reach for his throat. The man in the dark was making his presence felt. Mowery knew then that it was too late for escape. He would have to bluff it out.

Vigorously he squirmed free. "Gentlemen," he cried, coming boldly forward, "this isn't a police raid. All of you can go except Cowles. I want to talk to him."

CHAPTER VII.

FORCEFUL INTERRUPTION.

MOWERY'S words fell on an ominous silence. Those cornered sharpers glared at the apparition in stupefaction. The young doctor of the glasses took them off and wiped the lenses with his handkerchief, blinking rapidly. The orderly buttoned his white duck coat, and threw his cigarette stub away. He of the phlegmatic mien began to pluck coins out of the jumbled chaos of cards, chips, and money on the table. The burly player took to muttering inarticulately. Paul watched them all disdainfully. It was their move.

"Mowery, as I live!" gasped Cowles weakly, mopping his face, sobered. "What the devil——"

But the little party was beginning to collect its scattered wits. They all began to talk at once, and the babble was indescribable. The interne of the glasses began to question Paul's motives haughtily; the white-suited attendant slipped behind him. The big, gross player was evidently the ambulance driver. He shook a huge ham of a fist under the intruder's nose, and made threats. The phlegmatic one swore under his breath, calmly but continually. Cowles seemed to be mortally insulted, along with the rest. The tipper-off had scuttled for liberty.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" said Mowery protestingly. "One at a time, I beg of you!" Suddenly his demeanor underwent a change. "Because you are a bunch of crooks—that's why I'm here, if you will have it!" he shouted abruptly in their faces. "We've had enough of this outraged-innocence stuff. I'm not trying to hold you up, as you seem to think. Cowles here can identify me. I got in at a window because I was morally certain I'd be refused admittance at the door."

"You'll have to prove that 'crook' part of it," said the young doctor with the weak eyes mildly.

Cowles stepped forward arrogantly. "Mowery," he declared, as if he would settle all argument pro and con, "you'll

have to apologize. Nobody invited you to thrust yourself upon my friends this way."

Paul turned to him. "Cowles," he said quite as firmly, "you listen to me! You're in a nest of bad eggs here. You're being skinned alive. Have you ever investigated that knot hole at your back? Well, every hand you play is tipped off through it. That's the signal. Come, let's get out of here. I'll explain more fully when we reach the air."

The mouth of the brother of Christine Cowles was sagging. "By Jove, Mowery, I believe you're right!" he said lugubriously. "I'll take——"

But he never finished that sentence. From behind a pair of arms wound around Mowery's middle. He didn't struggle, but flung himself squarely across the table, and the orderly went hurtling over his head. The table was upset, and the lamp overturned. But the light didn't go out.

The interne hastily put away his glasses, and rolled up his sleeves as if preparing for an operation. The phlegmatic individual jumped silently on Mowery's back, and began to bang his head industriously against the table. But you can't kill a football player that way.

After that the fracas became general. Paul, casting about with doubled fists and upright again like a sturdy young oak, was glad to note that Gerald was fighting valiantly on his side.

Nobody paid any attention to the upset kerosene lamp, but it spilled its contents over a heap of straw in a near-by stall, and set it swiftly afire with its flaming wick. The building was old, and mostly of wood that had been drying into tinder for years. The incipient fire burrowed under that straw to the stairs, where an efficient back draft formed an ideal flue. The flames roared hungrily upward, seeking what they could devour.

The combatants still writhed on the floor, all attention given to their own affairs. Mowery broke loose from the scrimmage, and the smoke rolled into his face in a great, choking cloud. That cooled the lust of battle in his veins. He looked around him in bewilderment. The cellar was as light as day now. He let out a warning yell, and dashed at his enemies again on the floor, but not to renew the struggle.

He yanked the snarling, inextricable tangle apart with clawing fingers. Cowles was at the bottom of the heap, receiving hard usage. Paul shook the young doctor, first, into a realizing pense of what was happening. The smoke got in his throat and he choked.

Mowery was frantic with apprehension. Those sick and helpless people upstairs must be saved. He left the rest and dashed for the stairs, but already the flames had attacked them. At his elbow he heard a panting voice. Cowles was running there.

"Say, old man, this is awful!" gasped Gerald, clinging to him tenaciously. "Sis is up there somewhere. It's her night trick this week. Say, I want to thank you right now. You've made me see things pretty clearly to-night. I'm done!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE CRISIS.

PAUL veered toward the windows unheedingly. He kicked one out with his foot, and they crawled through, cutting themselves on the jagged glass. Behind them they heard the rest of the poker party making a similar exit. Outside was hubbub. A red glare shone in the sky. Paul paused only long enough to clear his lungs of the smoke. He heard the repeated, mournful clang of the town-hall fire bell. Men with pails of water ran aimlessly about. In that chaotic crowd he lost sight of Gerald. Through the open front door a steady stream of stretchers flowed. At the sight Paul Mowery muttered a prayer of thanksgiving. The patients and infants were being carried to places of safety on the lawn.

He searched anxiously through the crowd for the woman he loved, while the flames licked greedily at the vitals of the building, and the bricks of the walls grew hot. He spoke to many young nurses on the verge of hysteria,

but he could find no trace of Christine. All that any of them knew was that Miss Cowles had been at her post on the top floor, among the babies of the maternity ward. He grew frantic. Somebody beside him reported that everybody was accounted for except one nurse and one baby.

Mowery turned a haggard, questioning face toward the speaker, hardly realizing the dreadful import of what he heard. Before it sifted into his dazed mentality in all its horror, a cry of fear went up from the huddled crowd in the grotesque shadows of the stately trees. He looked up with a vast misgiving.

The missing nurse had come timidly out on the balcony, a bundle, wrapped in a shawl, in her arms. She came to the railing and glanced over apprehensively. It was Christine Cowles, sticking by her post until the last. Paul saw her instantly, and fought like a madman to enter the building. He was held by a pair of husky orderlies used to handling strait-jacket subjects. The local fire department hadn't arrived yet. Not a ladder was to be obtained anywhere.

Christine was speaking from her eerie, flame-girt balcony, and her words floated down distinctly, bravely. "I'm hemmed in up here," she called, a heroine rising superbly to the occasion. "In five minutes it will be too late. So I'm going to risk it, and throw this baby down to you! Then I'm going to jump myself. Get ready, somebody, to catch us, please!"

No one stirred at first. But Mowery spoke swiftly, eloquently to his captors, pleading with them. Doubtfully they let him rise. He stepped capably forward while his heart beat the reveille to his soul. Here was what the coach had meant when he had said his chance was sure to come. Yes, there were more important things in life than being able to catch a football. If he muffed that baby up there, for instance—but he wouldn't muff it. That little, human life depended on him.

When the crowd saw he was stepping forward to shoulder the responsibility, it stepped back, willing that his should be the blame if he failed to make the catch perfectly. But he might just as well have been alone for all he thought about those shirkers. His nerves were like wire strings as he took up his stand under the balcony.

Christine leaned far outward, and let go her hold on the squirming bundle. Paul braced himself, judged the flying ball of clothes correctly, and—made the catch surely! The infant howled lustily in his arms, and he petted it soothingly. Behind him the crowd broke into vociferous homage, and his whole body glowed at the token. He had never got such satisfaction out of catching a football. He calmly handed the rescued baby to a nurse. No longer could they call him a miserable muffer.

Up on the balcony Christine clapped her hands joyously. She was testing him unconsciously, and finding him all there.

The girl stood alone on her perch of peril. Back of her the black smoke poured, shot with little tongues of flame. She shrank nearer the railing. Plainly her nerve was failing her now that the helpless little life that had depended upon her coolness was safe. She was afraid to make the leap herself.

Mowery raised his arms toward her appealingly. "Christine!" he called, in a voice that vibrated with pride, love, and longing. "I want you! Come, dear! I'll catch you!"

He was carried away by his newfound ability to make good. He thought that he could work miracles.

She leaned toward him with a glad little cry, forward until she was about to lose her balance and fall. This would be the hardest feat he had ever attempted, but the football player couldn't flinch. He spread his legs a little more firmly, and reached upward. The shock of contact would be awful, flinging them both to the ground. There would be broken bones surely, but it was life against limb.

Quite unexpectedly a cheer came ringing from the great throng of bystanders. They flung their arms frantically aloft to the girl hesitating on the brink of the balcony. She drew back,

staring down among them. There came a clatter of wheels, a snorting of rearing, mettlesome horses. Men in rubber coats and helmets ran forward, bearing a long, slender latticework between them. The hook-and-ladder company had arrived in the nick of time.

Mowery had to bestir himself to be the first up the rungs. He jostled several firemen roughly aside, and mounted like a scrambling monkey. In no time at all Christine was cuddled trustingly in his arms, and he was picking his way carefully earthward again. Another salvo of applause greeted him.

Another November, and Paul Mowery was catching punts again for the glory of the old Lavender and Black. It was an unfavorable day of gusty winds. The soaring football became the helpless shuttlecock of countless capricious air currents. But catching a mere football looked easy to Mowery nowadays. Gridiron history repeated itself that day —up to a certain point. The enemy, remembering the previous year, played a kicking game. The score was close—seven to six in the varsity's favor in the waning minutes of the final quarter —and the last play of the game was a terrific punt that Mowery handled without a flaw on his own four-yard line, with the rival ends bearing down upon him. High up in the stand a young man was hugging a young woman delightedly. It was Gerald Cowles, congratulating his sister.

The Last Drumbeat

IT was some time ago that, acting upon the recommendations embodied in a report by a military commission, the French government reached the conclusion that the drum was no longer a necessary article of military equipment. The report set forth that the drum was a serious incumbrance in marching; that rain impaired its usefulness; that its calls could not be distinguished in time of battle; that it consumed a period of two years to turn out an efficient drummer; and that, by abandoning the use of the drum, many thousands of youths and men would be released for active service.

Since the decision of the French government other European powers have followed its example in decreeing that the "drum must go."

The history of the drum is both ancient and honorable. The Egyptians employed it, and the Greeks ascribed its invention to Bacchus. The Spanish conqueror Pizarro is said to have found drums in South American temples. The snakes of Ireland, we are told, fled from the Emerald Isle before the drumbeats of St. Patrick. The Puritans of New England used the drum as a church bell, and it figured frequently and romantically all through the wars of the Revolution and Rebellion.

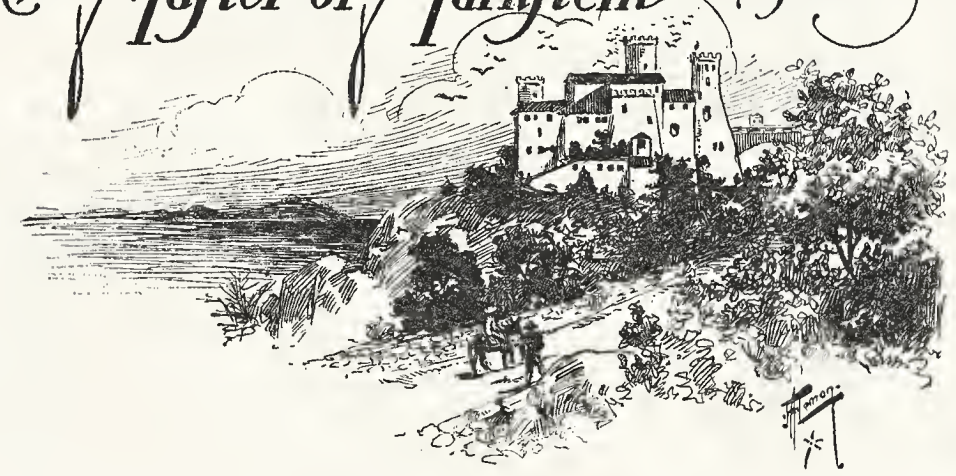
Playing Safe

AN elegant time is said to have been had," painstakingly wrote a country editor, "on or about last Wednesday evening, upon which occasion Mrs. Gladys Brown (or Browne), who claims to reside in Pardee Street, is rumored to have given a reception to the ladies of the Buzz Buzz Club. A goodly number of the hostess' ostensible friends are said to have been present, and it is claimed on seemingly reliable authority that all felt that it was, indeed, good to be there. It is stated that dainty refreshments were served, to which it is asserted all present did ample justice. It is further alleged that harmless games and friendly converse followed the repast, and it is claimed that the occasion was one long to be remembered."

"There!" ejaculated the editor, regarding his handiwork with approval, "if anybody can hang a libel suit on that they are eminently welcome to do so."

The Master of Markstein

By A. Sadler.



WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE.

If you missed the first installment, this abridged version will prepare you to enjoy the rest of the story.

BEFORE a corrupt and prejudiced court, Count Egbert von Guisenden, the Master of Markstein, is tried for treason against the kingdom of Bresabia and sentenced to death on false evidence. He is thrown into a dungeon to await the execution, but his friend, Count Geselthorpe, aids him to escape, and they ride away to the mountains of Markstein, where the master's faithful people are ready to defend him against the forces of the brutal king. Captain Velburs, his trusted henchman, calls the farmers of the domain to be ready for battle and proceeds to drill recruits in the castle yard.

It is discovered that Baron Villinger, the king's ambassador to Selzburg, has been seized by Velburs and held as a hostage for the safety of Guisenden, and is a prisoner in the castle. Guisenden sends a messenger to the king, offering to release the baron if terms of temporary peace can be arranged. The king agrees to the conditions, and the baron is allowed to go. Five months later Baron Villinger returns with his wife and his ward, Joan, the sister of Geselthorpe. They are escorted by a troop of Selzburg cavalry. The baron and the ladies are admitted as guests, but the soldiers are refused shelter. The captain of the troop tells Guisenden that the king has given the estates of Markstein to Baron Villinger, and that he will enter by force, if necessary. Guisenden scorns his threats and calls to his officers to turn out the guard.

The king arrives at Markstein with an army and lays siege to the castle, and the Lady Joan, with whom Guisenden has fallen in love, secretly opens a gate to the invaders and lets them into the courtyard, thinking to show her loyalty to the king, who has told her that Guisenden is a merciless villain. The Marksteiners are forced to retreat to the castle, which they prepare to hold for a time, and Guisenden tells Joan that he forgives her, knowing why she betrayed him. When all hope of resisting the king's forces is lost, a messenger arrives with a flag of truce and reports that the army of Selzburg is invading Bresabia, and that the king wishes to make peace and have Guisenden lead his men to defend the mountain passes.

Guisenden marches his troops against the invaders, but after a campaign of severe hardships in the snow-clad mountains, he finds that the Selzburgers have returned to their own country and abandoned the invasion. He returns to Markstein, and the treacherous king has him seized and taken at once to Weisburg. There he is placed in charge of the governor of the prison, who gives him a summary trial and condemns him to death.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE LAST.

IT was ten o'clock when Guisenden returned to his cell after his brief interview with the governor. Spring was not far advanced, and he judged that he had possibly some nine

hours to live and meditate upon his sins.

How different his position might have been had that unfortunate chance not sent the Selzburgers to the right-about in the passes! He might—what might he not have done with that new force in his life to direct his ambitious spirit and steady the bitterness which drove him to isolate himself from friends and look for foes where a different light might have shown those willing, with reciprocity from him, to stretch out the hand of fellowship?

Looking back on his restless career, he found no action of which he was ashamed. He had been harsh, cruel at times possibly, but his lot had been cast in places where the tenderer feelings were hard to cultivate and where a man learned quickly to rate the lives of others as lightly as his own. But did he stand once more a free man, with the page of the past turned over and a clean leaf ready for the writing of the future, one pure image ever before his mind would have kept him striving constantly upward, content though his best action earned but the smile of friendship from her on whom he had set his heart.

But was everything ended? The sense of unreality was still with him, and he could not bring himself to look upon his span as run. Nine hours left, and his condemnation a secret—for what could he hope? Reason answered, "Nothing!" but hope welled strong and snapped its sturdy fingers with gay incredulity in the gloomy face of logic.

When the jailer brought his midday meal Guisenden rated him soundly. "How now, sirrah!" he cried. "Is this the fare on which you would send a gentleman to the block, black bread and brackish water with which to hearten him for the knife? Is there neither meat nor wine in this den of thieves?"

"'Tis the prison fare, and if you like it not you are welcome to leave it to those with appetites less haughty," answered the fellow churlishly.

"You have an officer without the door," Guisenden said. "Convey him my compliments, and ask him if it is not reasonable that a condemned man be allowed at least the memory of a tasteful meal to take with him on the long road where inns are not."

The jailer went out and conversed a minute or two with his friends. Then the count heard him shambling up the passage, growling as he went at the violation of prison rules and waste of good provender. He returned presently, however, with a platter of roast beef, a huge chunk of white bread, and a flagon of sparkling wine, on which Guisenden, who was nearly famished, fell to with zest.

He was still occupied with the flagon when his door was flung open and a priest entered. "What, my son," murmured the visitor, as the bolts were driven home behind him, "do I find you dallying with wine and your end so near?"

"And why not, father?" the count asked. "I do but use the gifts of the Lord as He has taught. I have had bread, have still wine, am of a cheerful countenance and strong of heart. Will you not pledge me in a cup, father?"

The priest made the sign of the cross, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "I came hither with a message from my master," he said, "to raise your thoughts from earth to the judgment which you soon must meet. Is your soul dead that you can jest thus, with the long array of your crimes behind and the bar of justice before? Think! Think of the priest of Rollé whom you caused to be flogged to death; think of the abbey of Gebotberg where you burned the sacred edifice and drove out its chosen to perish in the snow."

"I have thought of both, father," Guisenden replied seriously, "and I am persuaded that both acts will do more to gain me mercy in heaven than a multitude of prayers."

"Avaunt, Sathanas!" cried the holy man, paling with horror, and waving his crucifix frantically before him. "You blaspheme, my son! If you cannot bring your mind to dwell on holy things how can I grant you absolution?"

"I thank you, father, but I need no

absolution. I have made my peace with God, and my prayers will not need the help of any man," the count rejoined.

The cleric stopped him with crucifix outstretched. "Your mind is in the hands of the devil, who, if you fight him not, will take your laden soul with him," said he. "I will leave you now, but I shall be by to soothe your passing when the end comes, and till then will pray that you may be brought to see the light." Then the priest departed.

The hours passed quickly, and the sun commenced his downward race toward the goal of the western hills, while Guisenden stood by his grated window and counted the inches of its progress.

Two hours left. Surely it was time he began to regard the matter seriously. No, he could not believe it till he was on the scaffold.

At last there came the measured tread of armed men along the passage, the bolts were flung back, and an officer entered, beckoning him to the door where the guards closed about him and began to march him rapidly toward the center of the fortress.

"You seem in a hurry, sir," Guisenden said irritably, as the officer urged them forward. "Are things so out of gear in this state that you cannot go respectfully even to a funeral?"

"There is need for haste," was the reply, whereat the count slackened his pace as much as possible, every sense alert to catch the slightest sound which might herald a reprieve which he guessed his guards were straining every nerve to forestall. Through many passages they passed, while Guisenden lagged in the path of those who pushed behind; and the officer fumed and cursed, no doubt extremely sorry for his unguarded words. But try as one will, one cannot prolong a journey of two hundred yards indefinitely, and presently the captive was ushered into a dimly lighted chamber where everything was ready for his reception.

The block stood in the center of the floor on its bed of new straw, and by it, masked and clad from head to heel in his close-fitting livery of black, stood the headsman of Weisburg. Waltenz was there, the look of devilish satisfaction still lighting his sallow features; also the advocate, and the governor stamping up and down, mightily pleased with his importance, while the walls of the small room were lined with pikemen.

Scarcely were prisoner and escort within the room when the governor nodded to the advocate, and that worthy read off at furious speed the list of offenses, "in consideration whereof, the king, having taken counsel with his regular advisers, has found himself forced in the interest of the public weal to order that you suffer death by decapitation."

"The priest is here, Herr Guisenden," said the governor. "You will be allowed five minutes in which to make your peace with God."

Guisenden sank to his knees in an attitude which he strove to make sufficiently humble, but the priest who bent forward, prepared to hear a tale of fiendish atrocities, got no such satisfaction.

"If you have one particle of priestly virtue in you," Guisenden whispered, "gain me all the time you can, and if I come out of this alive you shall have an abbey."

The father made no sign, but remained bent forward attentively while Guisenden mumbled meaningless phrases into his ear.

"The five minutes are up," said the governor.

Guisenden paused anxiously as the priest straightened himself. Would he betray him? But no—evidently he was more human than his looks would lead one to believe.

He turned his solemn eyes on the governor. "Five more minutes, excellency!" he cried. "The tale of this misguided wretch is but half done, and if you slay him now ere his crimes are confessed you send him without hope to certain perdition."

"Five minutes, then, and not a second more."

The governor would no doubt have consigned his charge to perdition with

the utmost pleasure, but a priest had more power with Ludwig than the chancellor, and no doubt he judged it best not to risk his place for the withholding of five minutes' respite."

So back again they went to their meaningless whispering.

"Enough! Enough!" Waltenz cried, as the period of grace came all too quickly to a close; but the priest played his game like a hero and insisted on delay.

"All we, like sheep, have gone astray," he commenced, in measured tones; then paused and swept a withering glance about the room.

"How is this, my lord?" he said, facing Waltenz. "Since when has it been permitted to remain covered in divine service?"

"Uncover!" cried Waltenz frantically, tearing off his beaver, but not till every morion was removed did the father proceed.

"Now to your work," the governor snapped, as the last syllable was droned out, and the executioner stepped forward.

"Will you be blindfolded, meinherr?" he asked.

Blindfolding would take time, and Guisenden consented readily.

So! 'Twas all to no purpose; his end had come. As the thick folds of the bandage shut the light from his eyes it seemed also to bar the last ray of hope from his heart.

It was quickly done, and the headsman led him forward a few paces and bade him kneel; but as his knees touched the straw and his neck went down to the rough wood of the block there came the sound of hurrying steps without. Guisenden sprang to his feet and tore the bandage from his eyes just as the door burst open and a man entered. The newcomer was Greben.

"In the king's name!" he cried exultantly, flourishing a parchment above his head.

"Cut him down!" snarled Waltenz, whipping out his sword and rushing toward Guisenden, his face distorted with passion.

The count sprang back, but not quickly enough, and a moment later felt the steel burning its way through his left shoulder. He hit out savagely with his clenched fist as Waltenz, carried forward with the impetuosity of his assault, crashed into him, and Greben sprang to his side, while the lights of the room spun before his aching eyes and the floor seemed to heave and sink beneath him like the deck of a storm-tossed ship. Then darkness blotted out everything and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER THREE DAYS.

WHEN at last his senses returned, Guisenden found himself in a great bed about which the curtains were close drawn, while a little, shriveled old man with long, snow-white hair and a beard reaching almost to his waist sat by his side regarding him anxiously.

"Where am I?" asked the count.

"In the house of Baron Villinger, your excellency."

"And——" He started up with a question on his lips, but such a pain shot through his chest that he thought he was rent in twain.

"Drink this," whispered the old man soothingly. "You are in the hands of friends, and all is well."

Guisenden obediently swallowed the potion held out to him and sank back wearily on his pillows, while the draft worked through his veins and laid its rest-craving heaviness upon his brows. His wits were all astray; his only recollection was of Waltenz's wolfish eyes and the stab of his avenging steel, and, firmly convinced that he was in another world, he fell asleep.

When he awoke the doctor was gone, and in his place sat Lady Villinger. The baroness had an open book on her lap, but it was uninteresting reading apparently, for it lay face downward, and the baroness gazed pensively through the window to where, beyond the city walls, the long stretches of meadowland and cornfield, but lately

released from their wintry prison, basked in the balmy winds of spring.

Guisenden watched his companion for a time in silence. The anxiety of the vigil by the bedside of her spouse with the alarms of the days of siege at Markstein had added lines to her pleasant, matronly face and sown more thickly than the years the silver threads among her raven locks.

"'Tis a fine view, madam," he said at last.

She started. "What? Awake, count? Herr Maartens would change his opinion of my nursing did he catch me daydreaming with a patient waiting to be attended to."

"May I ask how I come to be burdening your house, madam, and how long I have been here?" Guisenden asked.

"'Tis no burden, count," Lady Villinger replied. "Our house is but a stone's throw from the prison, and naturally when you were wounded General Greben brought you here."

"And I have been here——"

"This is the morning of the third day."

"Three days!"

"Yes, actually three days, during two of which you were delirious and we almost despaired of saving you. And now, count, you will regard me as your jailer and will not speak again till I give you permission. Your wants have perforce been neglected, which omission, if you will excuse me for a few minutes, I will endeavor to repair."

"The baron, your ladyship, is he recovered?" Guisenden asked, as the baroness rose to go.

"Yes; he had no relapse after the rally during which we left Markstein, and is now quite recovered," Lady Villinger answered.

"He is out at present," she added, the look of anxiety returning to her eyes. "There is much coming and going of messengers in the city of late, secret whisperings and meetings in lonely places, and I fear that there are troubled days in store for Bresabia.

"But there! I am enjoining you to silence, and instantly inciting you to talk. I know nothing of these matters, but the baron will be here anon, when you will receive all the information that we poor women are denied."

The baroness left him, and Guisenden groaned. Coming and going of messengers! Secret meetings in lonely places! The king's late ambassador concerned in the movement, too! All the signs pointed to the fact that the spirit so long asleep was awakening at last, and he lay on his back, unable to stir. One fact alone softened the bitterness: This roof which sheltered him, and beneath which he must, whatever his desires, spend some weeks, sheltered also the maid of his choice. He would meet her and talk with her, not on the old footing of haughty contempt on her part and bitter, unyielding pride on his, but as friends, whose tie was the closer because of the secret they shared.

As though in answer to his thoughts, there came a timid knock at the door, and Joan entered, bearing a little tray on which was set a steaming dish of broth.

The droop was gone from the girl's slim shoulders, the marks of weariness from her eyes, and the cheeks which Guisenden had last seen drawn and pale were mantled with a shy flush which set his weak pulses throbbing with a strength, to attain which all the physicians in Europe might have exhausted their skill and drugs in vain.

"Your excellency is better?" she said, coming forward and setting the tray down on a small table by his side.

"I was better before your ladyship came," Guisenden answered; "now, I am well."

"Then you will also be hungry, sir," she returned sedately, "and you will not tax your strength with the paying of compliments till this bowl is empty."

The count was weak as a babe, what between loss of blood and lack of sustenance, and his head swam as he tried to raise himself. The feeling soon passed, however, and presently, bolstered about by a multitude of soft pillows, he made short work of the bowl of broth, and, had he not known that

supplication would be useless, would have cried for more.

"And now," he said, as the last spoonful was finished, "the bann is removed, and I may question. Have you had news of your brother?"

"Yes; we expect him here by the day after to-morrow."

"That is good news, indeed, for you doubtless heard of the misfortunes that befell us after you left Markstein."

"Yes, General Greben told us all," the girl answered, with flashing eyes. "We women know little of what is going on at court and council; but, much as they conceal matters from us, we can use our eyes, and if I be not much mistaken the king will ere long have cause to regret his perfidy. And to think that I have bowed my knee before him, reverenced him as something more than man, have even——"

Her voice broke, and she paused, while tears trembled on the long lashes that hid her downcast eyes.

"Say no more," Guisenden begged, laying his hand for a moment on hers. "What happened at Markstein is twixt you and me alone, and for me it is as though it had never been. You will promise to say no more of it?"

She was silent for a long while, but at last whispered a barely audible promise.

"I will not ask you to think no more of it," the count continued, gaining courage from the ebb and flow of soft color in her cheeks; "I cannot quite put it from my own mind; indeed, I would not if I could, for it stands to me as the night on which I lost a foe and gained my most valued friend."

She flashed him then one shy glance. "I cannot forget it, either," she said; "and though for me there is bitterness in the cup, it yet has its sweetness, for by it I learned to separate truth from falsehood, to see in his true guise the wolf who hid beneath the sheep's wool, and to divine a good man e'en through clouds of lying and calumny which would have obscured his luster."

Then, before he could say another word, she fled.

CHAPTER XX.

A TOTTERING THRONE.

VILLINGER came to the sick room in the evening, and as he entered the doctor, who had been sitting with Guisenden, arose and left, begging the baron to remember that the patient was as yet scarce out of the woods and must not be excited.

"A pest on all doctors!" Guisenden cried irritably, when the cautious Maartens was out of earshot. "Come, Villinger, draw your chair close and give me the news. First, however, let me thank you for your kindness to a sick man. I hope my presence here will cause no unpleasantness at the palace."

The baron closed the door carefully, then came over and took the vacant seat by the bedside. "As for kindness," he growled, "you have naught to thank me for. I have scarce as yet fully recovered my strength from that accursed malaria which laid me on your hands at Markstein, and I shall have much to do to repay you for the care you bestowed on me then. Over any unpleasantness which may be caused at court you need not exercise yourself. I am no longer a minister of the king, and would not again take service with so double-dyed a villain, though he begged me on his knees and held a dukedom as the bait."

"To your tale, then, baron!" Guisenden cried. "I have no information as to what passed at court after my arrival from Markstein, and I am curious to know the circumstances which so narrowly saved my head."

"The tale is told in a few words," the baron began, after surveying his companion dubiously for a moment. "Greben got to work the moment he arrived in the city—indeed, he had won over a goodly company of nobles ere you left Markstein—but he was unaware of what was to happen to you, and expected that you would at least be given a public trial. Spies were at work, however, and on the afternoon of the day following your return, when we were gathered about the table in Greben's house perfecting our plans for

forcing your pardon from the king, laying our schemes warily and not expecting that we should need to put them into execution for some days, a message was brought that you had been sentenced under powers granted to the governor of the prison, and that your execution had been fixed to take place at sunset. 'Twas then a little after five, and for a moment we were utterly at a loss. There were ten of us present, and, at Greben's word, we caught up our hats and followed him into the street and made all possible speed for the castle. The people had, as we had taken pains to insure, already got word of the circumstances of your imprisonment. They were furious at the king's perfidy, and it needed but a word to bring them at our heels till, by the time we reached the palace, a large crowd had assembled and was swelling with every minute.

"We entered the palace and sent up our names, begging that his majesty would see us at once on a matter of urgency which closely concerned his own safety and the welfare of his kingdom. The chamberlain brought word that the king would not see us. There was no time for argument, and, pushing past guards and flunkies, still in our riding costumes, with the mud of the streets thick upon our high boots, found ourselves presently in a glittering chamber where one of the eternal investiture ceremonies was being held. I thought that between rage and fear Ludwig would have a seizure, and ere he had had time to recover his shaken dignity Greben stated our business bluntly as might be.

"'We have learned, your majesty,' he said, 'that Count Guisenden has been sentenced to death, and we beg that for your own welfare and the peace of the state you will instantly sign his pardon. He is to die in less than an hour, and there is no time for formality.'

"The king raged and fumed, threatening to send us all to follow you; but our number was increased by a round dozen of those who had been taking part in the ceremony, and Greben cut into the middle of Ludwig's vaporings without apology.

"'Your majesty sees before you many of the most influential noblemen of your kingdom,' he said, 'and if you will listen you will hear the people at your gates. Your majesty may sign a pardon or leave us the alternative of taking the people to the prison and releasing Count Guisenden by force. I would strongly advise you to sign the pardon, for once the wrath of the people is roused much is required to satiate them, and they may end the night's adventure by sacking the palace.'

"'This is treason,' wailed the king.

"'Treason or no treason, we are in earnest, and for once will have justice done,' said Greben.

"'Then do your worst and remember that my curse rests on you,' mumbled his majesty.

"'Come, then, gentlemen,' Greben said, 'I had hoped to avoid the dangers of open rebellion, but there is naught for it; we must go to the people.'

"The king called us back as we made for the door. His minions, thinking doubtless of the huge pensions and luxurious mansions paid for from the people's pockets, were whispering frantically in his ears.

"'Pens and parchment!' he cried at last. 'To save our people from the sin of rebellion, we grant this pardon now; but in the future look to yourselves, for we will assuredly award a fitting punishment for this night's work.'

"A few minutes sufficed, and Greben, seizing the parchment, dashed out of the palace, borrowed a horse, and galloped to the prison, while the rest of us made the best of our way on foot, those who had been taking part in the investiture ceremony flinging their robes on the reception-room floor and braving rain and mud in slashed doublet, silken hose, and drawing-room footwear. The remainder you know."

"And has the king taken any proceedings against you?" Guisenden asked.

"No, he dare not. He has left the palace but once since he returned from Markstein. He was to have attended a

thanksgiving service in the cathedral, but so threatening was the aspect of the crowd which waited for him that he ordered his state coach to the right-about ere it had gone a dozen yards."

"And what mean these secret meetings of which the baroness spoke?"

"They mean that Ludwig's day of power is all but run. I cannot tell you more now, since the orders are that you shall not be excited. To-morrow you will be a little stronger, and Greben, and others who took part in your release, will pay you a visit. They will tell you a great deal more of our schemes. Have patience. Remember, we need you badly, and you must be on your feet again as quickly as may be."

With which admonition Villinger left the patient to resume his grumbling over the ill luck which incapacitated him while the thing of which he had dreamed for years took shape and grew to strength within a few yards of where he lay.

CHAPTER XXI.

VAST DREAMS.

THE days passed quickly, and the plot developed, while Guisenden mended rapidly and found that Waltenz's sword had not prevented him from doing a fair share of the work. Also, he found that he was destined by his new-found friends for a far larger place in the scheme than he had dreamed of; in fact, that he was the pivot on which the whole ponderous wheel of revolution turned.

At first they would let him do little, watching over him with a solicitude which, accustomed as he was to the rough handling of field hospitals, quickly grew irksome, until only the knowledge of what he owed them kept him from open rebellion. But as he grew stronger he and his friends worked daily, and when at last he was allowed to leave his bed the conferences continued often far into the night also.

Guisenden was in his element in those days, and the keen enjoyment of the work was marred by but one anxiety. Joan, who in the first days of his sickness had been so kind, visiting him constantly, sometimes reading, sometimes passing a quiet hour with her lute, but more often just talking and learning to know him better, had lately forsaken him entirely. He was at a loss to account for this strange behavior, when all the signs had been leading him to hope for a realization of what he had never dared to look upon as more than a pleasant dream, and, finding himself alone with Geselthorpe one afternoon, he resolved to learn, if possible, in what he had offended.

"Has your sister left the city, Phillip?" he asked suddenly, breaking off a discussion of infantry tactics.

Geselthorpe answered in the negative.

"Then can you tell me what is my offense that I am deserted?" the count persisted, a little annoyed at his friend's hesitating air. "On my faith, I am the most unfortunate of men, and for every friend I make I lose twenty. Look at what has happened during the last three days: When first the news of our scheme was put about four-fifths of the nobility of the realm made this house their rendezvous, slipping in at all hours of the day and night till the poor baroness must have wished me in the street. Now our followers are reduced by half. Some I have insulted; others I have treated with coldness and suspicion, and yet more have dropped away without even an excuse."

"And for all the desertions we are stronger now than when we started out," Geselthorpe put in, no doubt hoping to lead his companion from the object of his first query. "Of the friends who remain we are certain, for they are honest and have no self-interest to serve beyond the interests of every man who cherishes his independence and loves his country. Of those weeded out we are well rid, since not one of them but would sell any party if he could further his own schemes thereby."

"But that still leaves the Lady Joan to be accounted for," Guisenden rejoined. "Self-interest is not her motive; neither have I wittingly insulted

her, and if I have treated her coldly I have had my feelings better under control than I dare hope."

"Who will account for the whims which guide the actions of a woman?" Phillip asked. "And yet, I think the girl is right."

"How so, sirrah? Are you, also, on the side of the enemy?"

"God forbid, count, but the moth is wise that leaves the candle ere its wings are singed. A maid might look upon Count Guisenden with favor, might listen to his half-veiled protestations with pleasure, and wait with joy for the open declaration which she knew must follow, but events move quickly. When Geselthorpe and Guisenden were fellow nobles, all was well; but the days approach when Guisenden will place a crown on his head and Geselthorpe be proud to bow the knee as his subject."

"In the heavens' name!" Guisenden cried wearily. "What sense or reason is left on earth?

"First an outlaw, and despised, I dare not speak; then I soar toward the sun, and honor robs me of that for which I sought her mantle most. I would that I had the crown already on my head; then would I command where now I can but supplicate. Go you, Phillip, this very instant, and if her ladyship is in the house, beg that she will take pity on an invalid's loneliness and read to him for a while. Greben will be here in an hour or so with drafts of proclamations for approval, and I need some stimulus, for my body plays the traitor and will as yet scarce do its duty by my mind. And, Phillip——"

"Yes, count."

"As head of the house of Geselthorpe, I beg your permission to pay court to the Lady Joan."

"Granted!" the younger man answered heartily, gripping his friend's hand. "And God speed you!"

Geselthorpe went out, and Guisenden lay back in his chair with an unaccustomed turmoil in his heart. A few days, and if all went well he would be a king, for nobility and people so long trodden under the heel of Ludwig and his harpies were roused at last.

As a youth, he had dreamed of such a day. Then as the years passed and he gained a knowledge of the great nations of Europe, as he felt the constant stab of Ludwig's persecution and saw the burdens which his country was blindly taking on its shoulders, his dreams vanished, and he faced the facts with bitterness and purpose.

When scarce out of his twentieth year he expostulated in the Council of Peers—into which assembly his position as only representative of his house gave him entry—against an imposition of the king. The church was at the high-water mark of its power in Bresabia then, and "divine right" was a part of the religious creed. The result was that he was instantly labeled by court and people as a troublesome fellow, to be watched and kept down, and the king gave him the option of making a public apology or undergoing a year's confinement. Guisenden fled to Markstein.

Outsiders knew practically nothing of Markstein then, and they sent an escort of twenty men under the command of a lieutenant to bring back the fugitive. The Marksteiners deprived the party of their arms, tied them to their horses, and sent them back the way they came. Within a month Guisenden was honored with the attentions of a general and a well-equipped force. Scarce half the gallant band returned to Weisburg, and they carried their general in a litter.

Since then Guisenden's career had been an almost constant struggle against his enemies. When for a brief space, on one account or another, it was safe for him to venture to the capital, he would attend the council to protest against grievances, of which there was never any lack, till he was again forced to seek the sanctuary of the mountains and from there make his voice heard as best he could. It was usually from Markstein that he spoke, for if the court had a real opportunity they drove it home to the hilt, and, when they had none, fell back on their inventive faculties and pushed their spurious charges as far as they dared without exposing their falseness.

Guisenden had had his dreams of

power, but they were of the old power of his line, to stand beside the throne as its strongest pillar, not to sit upon the throne himself.

Now, at last, when he had almost been tempted to cease his uselesss bickering on Bresabia's behalf; when, sick to death of the people's infatuation for the puppet whom they had idolized—nay, almost deified—he had resolved to shake the dust of his feet over Bresabia's borders and leave her to be trodden to slow death under the feet beneath which she seemed so willingly to place her neck, the country awoke; and, waking, turned to him whom she had cursed and hunted, to offer an honor he had never sought.

That honor Guisenden accepted, not lightly or blindly, but after careful thought had decided him that his acceptance would be for his country's benefit. Now the plot spread, and the roll of his friends in the outlying districts increased hourly, and they only waited the day when he should be fit to move to take the final step.

One thing only the count and his followers had to fear: The army, which, being after the pernicious custom of the age mostly mercenary and knowing nothing of the spirit which moved the people, stood faithfully by the man who for the moment held the treasury keys. The levies of the nobles who had fought at Markstein were now disbanded, however, and it remained to be seen how far the mercenaries' loyalty would carry them when the people rose.

Guisenden wanted but one thing now to complete his happiness. He who all his life had held women and those who courted them in contempt, was caught at last.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN SPITE OF CROWN.

JOAN came at last, bringing a book with her, but her hesitation and the telltale quiver of her lips told Guisenden that she was not entirely unsuspecting of the reason for which he had called her.

"I am glad to see your excellency so far recovered," she said.

"Your ladyship's interest comes tardily," the count answered, with a smile. "While new-found friends have been putting themselves to every inconvenience to speak with me for a few minutes, stealing in before daybreak, or, like Nicodemus, in the small hours of the night, you, who have been under the same roof all the time, without any peril to keep you back, have deserted me entirely."

"My brother said that you desired me to read to you."

"Then Geselthorpe rendered my message faithfully, but told you what was not strictly true. Let me play the coward, fair lady, and plead my weakness as palliation of the subterfuge. I wish to talk with you."

Guisenden rose somewhat unsteadily to his feet and conducted the girl to a chair beside his own.

"You will excuse me if I sit down," he said; "our conversation may be long, and my legs cannot be relied on to support my body with any dignity."

"What can your excellency have to say to me when so many weighty problems must possess your thoughts?" Joan asked, toying nervously with the pages of her book and keeping her eyes averted from the count.

"It is because there are such heavy matters on my mind that I desire to speak with you now, while under other circumstances I should have possessed my soul in patience till I could have come to you a whole man," Guisenden said. "I am a rough soldier, Joan, unskilled in those small arts and flatteries by which the gallants lay siege to a maiden's heart, but though my words may be lame and halting I beg you to believe that the feelings which I must express by them are none the less sincere. You gave me your friendship, Joan, and I have been grateful for it. Now I come to ask for more—yourself."

For many minutes she sat with head bent forward, saying nothing, then she murmured:

"Your excellency forgets the change

which a few days will bring into your life; kings do not look among their subjects for their brides."

"Is that your only objection to my suit?" Guisenden demanded. "Tell me, Joan, had I come to you with naught to offer but myself and Markstein, would you have said me nay?"

She raised her eyes for a moment then, but dropped them quickly before the light burning in his.

"Of what use to pain us both with such questions?" she asked. "The days of the Master of Markstein are passed, and those of Egbert of Bresnabia are about to begin."

"Yet I insist on an answer—or may I accept your silence to mean that in more lowly state I might have hoped?"

There was still no answer, but the girl's slim body trembled, and the warm blood leaped to cheek and brow, which had before been pale.

"I accept your silence, Joan," the count said. "To Guisenden you would have listened, and in what is Guisenden changed? Does the crown forbid me to seek my wife where I will? I think not; but if it does, then let another wear it. King or no king, I need you! I do not come as monarch, or even as noble; I come as I am, a man, with all my faults and weaknesses, and if you find it in your heart to accept the man, what are the steps of a throne that they should hold you back? Look up, and tell me that you do not love me, and I will trouble you no more; but if you cannot, then will I rest not day or night till I have broken down the last miserable wall of tradition or convention that holds you back and can claim you as my own. I wait upon your verdict, Joan. Look up and doom me if you can."

Slowly she raised her eyes, and the man held them with his own.

"Oh, 'tis cruel—cruel to tempt my weakness thus," she breathed, speaking so low that the words scarce reached the other's eager ears.

She rose as she spoke, but with a step as light as if he had never had a wound in his life, Guisenden sprang to her side and, ere she could avoid him, had her fast in his arms.

"Now, little prisoner," he said, turning her face up to his, "I will have an answer before I let you go. Do you love me?"

The young girl nestled closer to the strong man's side and breathed her tremulous answer, while earth and heaven rolled into one, leaving them isolated for a brief space, with no thought in the universe but of each other.

Scarcely a minute seemed to have fled when a discreet knock at the door heralded the return of Geselthorpe. "I am sorry to interrupt my sister's reading," he said, "but 'tis dusk and the poor light must have been trying to her eyes. Business is business, however, and General Greben is below with half a dozen friends, all laden with bundles of parchment and scarce able to hold their impatience within polite bounds."

Guisenden laughed lightly. "We will not delay the general, Phillip," he said; "but first I must ask you to congratulate the most fortunate of men."

"So, ho!" the other answered. "Most fortunate of men? 'Tis plain you know not Joan as well as I. I congratulate you heartily, but think not to have my sympathy when you come asking it by and by. Forgive my levity," he finished more soberly. "Were there gray streaks in my hair, I should know how to meet the case with fitting dignity. As it is, I can but jest like a fool to hide my embarrassment in the face of such brazen happiness. If I be not too young for so solemn an office, I bestow my blessing and wish every joy to you both. Now run away, sister, and send some one with lights; and on your way tell General Greben that the important business which detained his excellency is completed satisfactorily. Away with you! You can resume the reading of that surpassingly interesting tale in the morning."

With a curtsy and a happy smile, Joan left them, while Guisenden, his mind released from the doubt which had oppressed it, prepared to throw himself with redoubled zest into work

which he knew from past experience would carry him well into the small hours.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEARING THE CRISIS.

ARNOLT, Laffel, and Felstenburg were taken last night; the troops hold every gate of the city, and it seems that the king, taking courage from despair, has decided to act at last, which means that we must strike before he can get in a decisive blow. 'Tis a pity, for we hoped that you would be able to lead us when the hour for action came."

It was Greben who brought the news, and Guisenden turned it over in his mind in silence for a few minutes. If Ludwig was moving, he and his friends must do likewise, and that quickly, or the fruits of their labors might be irretrievably lost.

During the past fortnight they had been drafting retainers of the various friendly nobles into Weisburg, bringing them into the city by twos and threes, and housing them with the townspeople, who for once were only too pleased to endure the inconvenience of billeting. Fifty Marksteiners had been brought in this way, with a like number of the hardy eastern fen men, while other chiefs had contributed their quota of well-trained and well-armed men till Guisenden could muster a force at least strong enough to make matters extremely unpleasant for the mercenaries, and with which he hoped, aided, if necessary, by the townspeople, to overcome them.

"Very well, general," he said quietly. "Let word be given to our followers to meet here at ten o'clock to-night with all possible secrecy. We muster near three hundred men, and I have seen far tougher problems tackled by half the number. Meantime, I must have my arms furbished. Yes, Greben, you may protest till you are weary, but I shall lead you to-night just the same. Do you imagine that I am going to sit here in comfort while others fight my battles for me? 'Twould be a sorry apprenticeship for the throne, indeed. My limbs are not as strong as I might wish, but they still have weight enough to make a man regret getting in my way. As for fighting, I think there will be little of it. The treasury has been hard pressed of late, and the troops' pay is in arrears. These mercenaries fight for their purses, and if those are empty, and they see no prospect of filling them through Ludwig, they are like to risk little. The proclamations have been distributed?"

"Yes."

"And received——"

"As far as can be judged under the disadvantageous circumstances in which the need for secrecy places us, with absolute satisfaction."

"And my approaching marriage——"

"Pleases them most of all. The people are sick to death of Ludwig's foreign court ladies, and had the marriage been one of policy you could not have planned a better stroke."

"Then, general, I am satisfied!" Guisenden cried gladly. "Do you arrange to keep me informed of every turn which events take, and ask the gentlemen who are to take command at various points in the city to come to me here without delay, that we may add the finishing touches to the arrangements. Captain Velburs, whose experience is almost unlimited, will take the men allotted to him and make for the prison when the march upon the castle is begun. 'Tis like to be little guarded, for Ludwig will have every available combatant about himself. Velburs will first release the state prisoners, then see to the preparation of strong rooms to lodge the king and the followers who accompany him, till such time as we are able to dispose of them. If the mercenaries resist, they are to get no mercy; but such as surrender at discretion will receive their full arrears of pay and, provided they start forthwith, safe conduct over the border. Till to-night my work is done, but you have much still before you and I will not detain you further."

"But your excellency will not ven-

ture out to-night," Greben protested. "If you were sound in body I would be the last to urge you to remain hidden; but, setting aside the chances of fighting, the least exertion is likely to reopen your wound, and of what avail is our scheming if you perish in the hour of victory?"

"Vex not yourself, old friend," Guisenden answered, laying his hand on the veteran's broad shoulder. "That wound is far better healed than Doctor Maartens would have us believe, and a scuffle with half-hearted mercenaries is not like to open it. And if it did, think you that your work would have been in vain? Not a bit. The spirit of the people is roused, and would not sink to sleep because Guisenden was gone. There are many among our friends who could fill the throne as well, if not better, than I. Of statesmen I could find you a score within an hour who have wider experience than I; of soldiers I have not to leave this room to give Bresabia the best she could desire."

Greben bowed.

"Your excellency could doubtless find us no lack of good soldiers and good statesmen," he said; "but could you find us a man uniting both talents? Aye, you might do that, but could you find us a man blessed with the qualities so essential to us now, who has never sacrificed his honor or bowed his pride before the puppet we are about to displace? You could not. Not one of those who now look to you but has received at one time or another, as the king's mind swung from faction to faction, aye, and received with gratitude, some tawdry favor at his hand. You he feared only less than he hated, and, had you stooped to soil your fingers when he bribed, you might have been the greatest subject in the land. I, among the others, have hated you, and when our eyes were blind to the goal toward which our folly was leading us, would gladly have had your death, however accomplished. The nobles were galled by your haughtiness and undisguised contempt, while the people, led by their clergy, regarded you as the enemy of the church and every institution which years of careful schooling had taught them to regard as sacred."

"If you have hated me, you now make more than reparation," Guisenden said, his voice shaking with emotion. "That which I have so far done is little, but may Heaven reward me accordingly if I give Bresabia one moment's cause for honest regret that, in the first violence of her awakened spirit, she put her confidence in me."

There was unaccustomed moisture in the veteran's gray eyes as he wrung the other's hand and turned to go. "And may we," he cried, "return to the yoke we now throw off if we cease an instant in our endeavor to lighten the heavy burden you take up for us."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WITHOUT HONOR.

GUISENDEN kissed the Lady Joan tenderly while she strove to hide her care behind a brave but tremulous smile, then passed down the stairs to where Greben and the others waited his coming. "Are all here?" he asked, glancing up and down the dark street, now filled with the silent figures of his little force.

"All, your excellency."

"Then let those who are to look to the north and eastern gates move off. You will take up your positions; and, mind, not a move till you hear the signal. March by as little frequented ways as possible. The people will be roused soon enough when the trouble begins, and we want no cheers to herald us, or crowds to impede our approach."

The officers saluted in silence and set out.

"Now, Velburs, you have your instructions. See to it that there is no hitch."

The captain slipped away, and still further depleted the slender band.

The rest waited for a while, their cloaks pulled tightly about them, for the night was cold and rain fell with steady persistence—an ideal night for a surprise attack.

They were confident of victory, yet much rested in the hands of fate, and

they could not but feel some anxiety when they thought of the stake for which they played. If they had underrated the loyalty of Ludwig's troops they would have all their work to carry the castle, even if they carried it at all. Eventually, of course, with the resistless tide of the nation behind them, they must succeed, but every delay meant a harder struggle and more lives to sacrifice, and Guisenden had reason to believe that Ludwig had already asked for, and been promised, assistance from Austria.

Therefore they must strike home quickly before the help could arrive, for, once Ludwig was deposed, outside help would be practically useless, and the emperor was not the man to waste men and treasure in trying to force a king on a country which abhorred him, and where he could never hope to retain his place without foreign aid.

Ludwig was, of course, aware that the conspiracy against him was drawing to a head; but, incapable himself, and with none but the worthless parasites of his own creation about him, he could take no effective steps to stay the tide. His sudden flash of energy that had resulted in the seizure of Arnholt, Laffel, and Felstenburg, had died with the hysterical unreasoning rage of which it had been born, and, his craven fears for himself returned, the troops had been recalled from the city gates and were once more in the castle. For this, though it meant more strength in the palace itself, Guisenden was glad, for they would now know where their foes were, and have no need to keep constantly on the watch against sudden attacks from unexpected quarters.

The issue would be decided one way or another in an hour or so. They were across the Rubicon now, with their boats burned behind them, and the time for weighing the chances of the enterprise was passed.

"Come, gentlemen," Guisenden said. "'Tis time we were moving."

Then, with a low command, he took his place at the head of the little column; and they began their march.

The hour set for the rendezvous had been ten o'clock, but there had naturally been considerable delay in getting all the men together, putting them in array, and sending off the detachments, and it was close upon midnight when they started on their way.

The streets were deserted as they entered the main thoroughfare leading to the castle, but the measured tread of the soldiers brought many heads to windows, and ere they reached their destination men but half dressed and half awake were pouring out behind them armed with any and every weapon, scarcely knowing what was happening, but ready and anxious to strike a blow in the cause of freedom should they be required.

"Hasten!" Guisenden cried over his shoulder. "Our friends are overanxious for the fray, and if we are not careful will be before us yet."

Accordingly the little band broke into a run, swinging into the square at a smart pace, and as light after light sprang to life behind them, and the growing hum told that the news of the enterprise was speeding across the sleeping city, came to a halt before the castle gates.

"Who goes?" cried the guard, while a bugle within shrieked its shrill alarm.

"Open, in the name of Bresabia!" Guisenden answered. "And, fellow, tell whoever commands your troops that we have no quarrel with him, and if you surrender peaceably all will receive their wage and safe conduct across the frontier. If you resist, look to yourselves. Mines are already laid to the gates, and should we be compelled to force our way in you will receive scant mercy."

In regard to the mines Guisenden spoke truly, for they had brought powder bags with them, and men were laying them and setting the fuses before the last of the force had come to a halt.

"I'll take your honor's message to the colonel," shouted a voice after some colloquy on the wall above.

"Then see to it that you hurry. In five minutes from now, if you be not back, the fuses will be lighted, and we shall be among you."

In that moment Guisenden blessed the folly which caused kings to employ mercenaries in preference to national troops. With the knowledge that rebellion was rife in the city, and that a rising might come at any moment, they had not even troubled to double the guard on the gate.

The darkness favored the attackers also, and those upon the wall could not tell whether they had to deal with fifty men or a thousand.

While Guisenden and his followers waited the square filled behind them with thousands of eager citizens, every man of whom seemed to be carrying a light of some description or another, till the jumbled mass seemed crowned with a forest of fire.

"Tell them to put out the lights!" Guisenden cried, as the crowd drew nearer. Not only did they make themselves splendid targets for those who might presently man the walls, but, what was far worse, they showed up the scantiness of the troops about the gate, which was the last thing Guisenden wished the inmates of the palace to learn.

"Out with every light!" roared Greben, rushing back to where the mob had come to an undecided pause. "Would you be shot down like rats, and ruin everything besides? Out with the lights! Every glimmer is worth a hundred men to the enemy."

The lights disappeared as though by magic, and the soldiers were surrounded by the friendly darkness again, with the low murmuring of the now invisible crowd rising and falling like gusty wind behind them, and the wall of the palace towering gloomy and forbidding before.

Guisenden was about to give orders for the fuses to be lighted when a voice again hailed from above:

"Colonel Weltheim agrees to your conditions, but requires guarantees of safety for his men."

"You no doubt have a ladder within," Guisenden replied. "Tell Colonel Weltheim that if he will come down to us we will accept him as hostage for his followers' good faith. The people will then be dispersed, and you will march out into the square, each man surrendering his arms as he passes the gate. When our business in the palace is done you will return to it under guard till tomorrow, when you will be paid your dues and commence your march to the border. Remember that the least hint of treachery will be the signal for Colonel Weltheim's death."

"And what guarantees have we?" demanded the guard.

"You have the word of Guisenden," the count returned. "If that is not enough, further parleying is useless, and we had better get to business.

"They will agree," Guisenden whispered, turning to Greben as the spokesman once more left the wall. "Let messengers be sent to the parties at the gates. Bid them each leave half a dozen men, that we may have news should the king or any of his household attempt escape that way, and let the remainder hasten here."

The messengers sped away, and before the answer from the palace was received the others had come in, so that the attackers mustered a slightly more imposing force. Guisenden then selected some fifty men from the better armed and more completely clothed of the crowd to augment the numbers of his followers; then, not without considerable difficutly, the people were persuaded to disperse.

At last the commander of the mercenaries came over the wall, and descended by means of a rope ladder, not one whit abashed by the contempt with which his captors regarded the perfidy which had served them so well. He even had the audacity, as he saluted, to offer Guisenden the services of himself and his band.

"I have sufficient love of our art," said he, "to admire military qualities even though I have been worsted by them, and I ask nothing better than to serve under your banner."

"I thank you, colonel," Guisenden returned. "I prefer, however, to trust to those whose limits I know better. You have served under so many flags

that I fear you are sometimes a little uncertain as to the color of the one which for the moment claims your allegiance. I must trouble you to remove your sword.

"No, put it on the ground, please," he added, as the colonel held the hilt of the weapon toward him. "'Tis worthy no hand but your own."

In less time than it takes to tell the powder bags were cleared away, and, the gates of the palace being opened, the guardsmen, apparently as well pleased with their night's work as their chief, filed out between the silent lines of Guisenden's contemptuous followers, each man surrendering his weapons as he passed.

This completed, leaving all but a score of men to guard the now harmless and perfectly docile mercenaries, Guisenden and his friends entered the palace to interview the king.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RUIN.

IT was a strange sight which met the eyes of Guisenden and his friends as they entered the room of state to which the king had retired with his remaining followers. Ludwig sat upon the throne, dressed in full panoply, even to the crown, wringing his hands and sobbing hysterically. About him were his nobles, the base friends and relatives who had so lately flaunted their ill-got dignities beneath the eyes of the oldest Bresabian families, and insulted with impunity the finest soldiers and statesmen in the land. Now, as ever, they formed a fit train for their master with their chattering teeth, shaking limbs, and panic-stricken eyes. Indeed, from their behavior it would have been difficult to choose between the men and the women.

Two people only were there who displayed a remnant of courage—a man and a woman, and both Guisenden's bitter enemies; Waldemar von Waltenz and Lady Dagmar zu Zorgen. They stood together, a little apart from the rest of the company, pale but calm, eying the newcomers with hatred and their own companions with contempt.

"What do you want with us?" cried Ludwig.

"All that we require at present is that your majesty and your court will don suitable apparel and prepare to accompany us to the lodgings which have been prepared for your reception," Guisenden answered quietly.

"To be murdered!" moaned the king. "No, we will not go. You dare not touch us!"

"I should be sorry to have to submit you to the indignity of removal at the hands of my soldiery," Guisenden said. "Our time is precious, however, and we cannot waste it in argument."

"You guarantee my life?" gasped the king hoarsely.

"Yes, and those of your friends, provided they give no trouble."

"Then we will go; but remember that there will be an awful vengeance for your work this night."

With that, half led and half carried by two of his familiars, Ludwig left the room, his court following in his wake. Waltenz favored Guisenden, as he passed, with a gaze which, were looks blades, would have laid him lifeless. The Lady Dagmar, walking unassisted, kept her eyes on the ground, and passed out without an upward glance.

Quickly enough Ludwig and his minions returned, a little calmer now that they were assured that they were not to be killed out of hand, though they still presented a far from heroic tableau. Guisenden waited a little longer till all but the Lady Dagmar and Count Waltenz had arrived; then, as they still delayed, he remembered the earnest conversation in which they had engaged while he parleyed with the king, and, fearing that the pair had still a card to play he picked out the calmest of the king's followers, and requested him to accompany one of his officers to Waltenz's room. They returned a minute later.

"Count Waltenz is dead, excellency," the officer reported. "Poison was used apparently."

"Madam," said the Master of Markstein, to one of the women, "will you kindly accompany this gentleman to the apartments of Lady zu Zorgen, and request her to hasten? I cannot delay departure further."

They brought back the message which Guisenden expected. Lady Dagmar was dead also.

Guisenden could not pity them. They had been his foes, and to satisfy their hatred had used the vilest of weapons, but they were the least contemptible of all, and had the courage to take their own lives rather than bow their heads.

The sun was rising over the eastern hills as the count and his friends left the prison after seeing to the safe lodgment of Ludwig and his train, and, worn out by long hours of wakefulness and the strain of the night's work, struggled back through the frantic throngs. Guisenden would have got away quietly if he had been able, for his shoulder was paining him sorely, and, now that the excitement was passed, his strength, sapped by weeks of forced inaction and close confinement, was well-nigh exhausted. But it was useless; the people were awake and watching. His days of independence were done. He had won a crown, and must start at once upon the most arduous duty which kingship holds—to forget one's self and one's weaknesses, and wear the mask of strength, happiness, and pride which is the only side of monarchy the people care to see.

He made a score of speeches on the short ride which brought him to Baron Villinger's home. He scarcely knew what he said, but the people were pleased, and yelled their pleasure till he was deaf, while his head seemed ready to split and the faces became blurred, and whirled beneath him in a sea of white.

At last the house was reached, and, supported by friendly hands, he climbed the stairs, but even then the people were not satisfied.

"The queen! The queen!" they shouted.

Guisenden struggled to his feet, and sought the hand of Joan.

"Is it necessary?" the girl asked, gazing anxiously at the worn face of the count as Villinger flung up the window.

The soft voice, with its gentle note of solicitude, and the protective air which women delight to exercise over those they love, drove the weariness from the man's brain and stayed the shaking of his limbs.

"Never fear, Joan," he said, as he drew her toward the balcony. "Joy does not harm."

Then, in a whisper, that the others might not hear, he added:

"There is only one moment in my life prouder than this. This we share with the people; the other was for you and me alone."

More bowing, more haranguing, and more cheering, but at last it was done, and the two were at liberty to step within, though the crowds remained singing and shouting till the sun, then new-risen, had run his course and sought the night clouds of the west.

A kingdom had changed hands in a few short hours; a revolution had been accomplished with the loss of but two lives; and the two victims had sacrificed themselves.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE VERDICT.

THE third day after the capture of the palace saw the mercenaries well on the march to the border, and on the next the peers of the realm met for the formal trial of the deposed king.

Ludwig was brought from the prison in a closed carriage, well guarded by the troops who had been assembled to assist in the coup d'état. Great crowds assembled in the streets to see him pass, but there was no open sign of hostility. Neither hoot nor hiss was heard on the whole journey, but the sneering smiles and contemptuous silence must have bitten far more deeply into Ludwig's soul than could the most passionate outbreak.

The scene at the trial was on a level with every other in which Ludwig formed the central figure. Never, even

in the days of his greatest power, had he appeared anything but mean.

Now he stood before his judges for what he was—the caricature of a man, wrecked alike in body and mind by his evil courses, robbed of the position which had shrouded his wickedness in a thin veil of decency, and deprived of those pillars of egotism which had formerly buttressed him. At last Ludwig the king was gone, and Ludwig the man stood forth in all his nakedness.

He wept, implored forgiveness, and promised to amend his ways. He declared that his court should be swept clean, and every patent which he had issued revoked. Unjust taxes should be repealed, and the mercenary army should be disbanded. Guisenden and his friends might choose his ministers and select his companions. He would do anything, sign anything, swear anything, if only they would leave him in his place, allow him to hide himself still behind the outward show of a monarchy whose duties he recognized his unfitness to carry out.

The judges heard him to the end in silence, though his harangue took more than an hour. Then, when at last he indicated that he had said his pitiful all, Guisenden rose to give him the verdict of Bresabia.

"A crown," said the Master of Markstein, "is in the gift of the people, and it is to the people that the greatest of monarchs must eventually render his account on earth. Bresabia put you in your place, and has endured for more than a score of years while you have abused her choice, and now at last she claims a reckoning. She asks you, where is the proud position which she held when your great father surrendered the throne which he graced, and what can you say? She asks you, where is the great treasure which you have wrung from her patient hands? Dare you tell her? Bresabia lays at your door the countless maimings and deaths which her inoffensive children have suffered from your soldiery, the homes broken up and lives ruined to satisfy the unbridled appetites of the vultures you let loose to prey upon her. A monarch's life should be an example to his people, an example which young men and women may take as a pattern to lead them in the paths of honesty and virtue which alone can insure the welfare of a state. When has your life, public or private, been aught but an incentive to evil and corruption? To what action in a score of years can you point, on which an honest man may look with pride? All these things lie in the scale against you, and we are here today as the voice of Bresabia to ask you what you can lay in the balance which will counteract that weight."

The trembling wretch moaned and recommenced his plea, but Guisenden cut him short. "To cry for mercy is not justification," he said. "If you have aught to say in refutation of the charges, speak, and we will listen. If you have naught to bring forward, all self-abasement is in vain."

A feeble sob alone broke the silence which followed. Ludwig saw his doom written in the hard, unpitying eyes which encompassed him, and, face to face with the inevitable, held his peace.

"You answer not," Guisenden said, after an interval, "and therefore we must presume that there is naught that you can say. Bresabia, here and now, through us, her representatives, renounces you and yours forever, and you or your friends will venture within her borders again at your peril. A provision will be made, sufficient, with ordinary care, to keep you in decency and comfort, and in doing this Bresabia fills the last claim you have upon her. Go, now, and seek what rest you can, for to-morrow you leave the country which you have brought to the verge of ruin."

At dawn on the following day Ludwig, accompanied by a few of his creatures, was escorted to the frontier on the first stage of his journey toward the court of his brother, where he hoped to find a refuge, at least for a time. His queen, given ample warning, had left for her own home a month before. The obstacles which had before made the upward path impassable were therefore removed, and the road to regeneration lay open to Bresabia.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE NEW REGIME.

THE weeks which followed Ludwig's deposition were a round of ceaseless toil for Guisenden. Officers of state were appointed, the treasury overhauled, unjust taxes rescinded, and new ones, more equitably distributed over the various classes of the population, were levied to meet the pressing needs of the new administration.

Greben, with other soldiers of long experience and proved ability, drew up a scheme for the formation of a national army which, with so many turbulent neighbors watching the borders, had to be put into effect without delay.

Guisenden had taken up his quarters in the palace, and was occupied all day with officials and deputations, dividing his nights between his future ministers and the study of matters regarding which future streams of deputations would wait upon him on the morrow.

He saw little of Joan, but Geselthorpe, at intervals in his labors, kept each informed of the other's welfare.

But at length, when the first press of business was over, when Guisenden had been formally elected by the peers, there came a short lull. At least two happy people had waited for that lull anxiously, and on a glorious July morning, with all nature pointing an omen of good cheer, Guisenden led his lady to the altar.

Within a month followed the coronation, of which Guisenden remembered little save as a confused dream of passing and repassing priests and peers, the constant thunder of guns and wild cheering of the exultant people, the crowds this time being hemmed in behind cordons of splendid-looking troops who formed the nucleus of the national army.

That night, when the last minister and courtier had sought his couch, and only the alert steps of the sentinels in the courtyard broke the silence, Guisenden cast aside his robes and flung open one of the windows of his room. For some time he stood there, looking toward the north, where, faint and far off, the black line of the mountains just showed above the horizon. The old, wild blood surged within him for a moment as he thought of the dark-browed men in the little hamlets who would be discussing him that night, the hardy hunters curled close about their camp fires who would fight over again the battles in which he had led them to victory in far lands.

"Is it worth it?" he asked himself aloud.

A soft hand fell on his shoulder as he spoke, and, turning, he found Joan watching him wistfully.

"Regretting already, my dear?" she asked, stealing close and laying her head on his shoulder. "Have you paid too dearly for the prize?"

Once more Guisenden let his glance travel to the far hills which for thirty years had been to him home, playground, and kingdom. Then he closed the window firmly, and drew the curtains.

"No, my heart," he said quietly, as he slipped an arm about her; "a kingdom is nothing, and even Markstein is well lost, when I have you."

THE END.

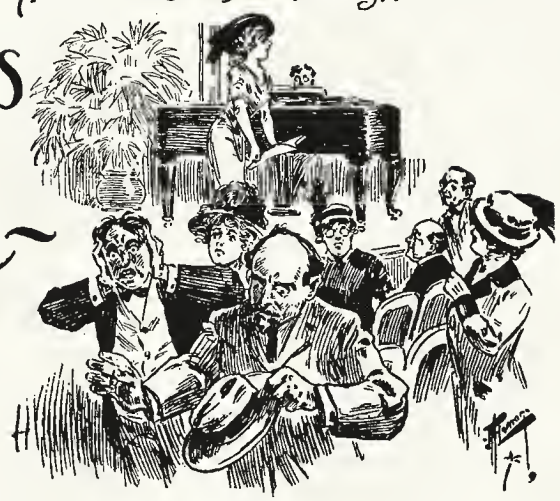
Almost a Joke

COMMANDER PEARY, the famous arctic explorer, never started on one of his exploring expeditions without receiving all sorts of packages from cranks—cowhide underwear, tea tablets, medicated boots, and what not. A few days before the start of one of his trips a club acquaintance wired to him to expect an important package by express. The package came. It was labeled, "To be opened at the farthest point north." Peary opened it at once, however. It was a small keg, inscribed, "Axle grease for the north pole."

Romance His Side Line

Adventures of Steve Blake, Travelling Man

By J. A. Fitzgerald.



(A COMPLETE NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

OFF FOR THE FRONT.

ALL the other employees of Hinkle & Co., one of the biggest dry goods and notions houses in the United States, quit work for a few seconds when Steve Blake, the firm's most popular salesman, emerged from the glass-inclosed office, where he had been in consultation with Fred Hinkle, head of the business, and stood in the center of the big showroom calling farewells to his fellow workers. The arrival or departure of the jolly, good-natured drummer was always the signal for a mild demonstration on the part of his associates, his superiors viewing these brief periods of hilarity with amused satisfaction, and even taking part in them now and then.

"So long, everybody!" shouted Steve.

"Good-by, old top!" came the rousing response.

"That ten weeks' trip through the South will bring your hair out, Steve," suggested Trimble, the auditor.

"It's all out now," Steve returned. "Those short beds they have below the Mason-Dixon line will finish the job. That's where I lost most of my hair in the first place. Still, boys, I'm the healthiest member of Hinkle & Co.'s flying squadron."

"And the most unmarried," added Larrabee, the general manager.

Steve put his finger to his lips in a warning manner. "Sh!" he whispered, loud enough for every one to hear him. "Nix on the wedding bells."

This solemn announcement started the laughter going all along the line. Hinkle looked inquiringly at the big salesman.

"I'm surprised that you are making this trip alone," the boss said, with a wink at the others. "I fully expected that you were going to turn it into a honeymoon journey. I was prepared to pay all expenses in that case."

"That's the time I fooled the whole bunch." Steve chuckled. "You all thought that dame had landed me."

"She'll land you yet," declared Trimble.

"Not a bit like it," the salesman returned. "I've been in business for myself a good many years, and I don't think I'll bother taking in a partner at this stage of the game."

"You won't have anything to say about it," broke in one of the bookkeepers. "She'll take you in."

"Are you going to send her some picture post cards?" asked Larrabee.

Steve picked up his traveling bag. "That will be about all!" he exclaimed. "Over the river everybody! Ta, ta, playmates! Me for the choo-choos, and the sunny South!"

He passed through the street door, his rotund figure swaying to the stirring strains of "Dixie" whistled by his comrades. A minute later he was in a taxicab whirling along to the Pennsylvania Station on the first leg of the long Southern invasion.

"They wish they were in Dixie, eh?" he kept repeating to himself. "They can have my share of it, all right. One of these trips is enough for me. Ten weeks away from New York! Those chaps in the office don't know when they are well off."

As he rode on, Steve fell into a retrospective mood, recalling in detail the shattered romance that had taken up most of the two weeks he had been at home—the romance his fellow workers had been joshing him about.

"Great Scott! That bunch will never let up on me," he thought. "It all came from Trimble having seen me with her that day. Only for that, my reputation as a blown-in-the-bottle bachelor would still be unimpaired. No use chirping. I sure had a narrow escape."

Automatically his hand went into his pocket and drew forth a square card. It bore this inscription: "Martha Lake."

A sigh that brought most of his advoirdupois above the belt escaped him, as he read the name over and over. "Oh, you Martha!" he said fervently. "You sure are some gal. You might have been Mrs. Stephen Randolph Blake now if it wasn't for your awful voice. If you ever tumble to the fact that you can't sing a note you're going to make some fellow awfully happy."

He shuddered as he recalled the earsplitting shrieks that had driven him from her side. Then he kissed the card and put it back in his pocket.

"Well, I've got to stop thinking about her," he resolved. "Business has the call on romance from now on."

Ten minutes more, and he was ensconced in one of the chair cars of the Southern Limited, rolling along to the land of cotton. By way of carrying out his resolution to forget the girl he had left behind, he bought a Top-Notch Magazine, and began to read it. But, somehow or other, a certain name kept bouncing across the pages; two words entirely foreign to the story appeared at the end of every other sentence.

"Come, come, Stephen, my boy," he said, half aloud. "This will never do. You've got to sidetrack Miss Lake. It's dry goods, pins, and needles for yours, old pal. The idea of your worrying about a girl that gave you the greatest bawling out of your entire career; a girl that never has given you a serious thought."

He lay back in the seat, and laughed heartily over the audacity of his thinking that she might consent to share his name. It was at this precise instant that feminine cries from the other end of the car caused him and the other passengers to turn their eyes in that direction. A pretty girl, her eyes red from weeping, was repelling the attentions of a young fellow seated on the arm of her chair. Her escort's face was flushed, and it was plain that he was coaxing the girl to lower her voice. But it was equally plain that she had no intention of heeding his advice.

"Go way from me," she said petulantly. "You're a horrid brute. If I'd known about that affair I'd never have married you. Oh, what a fool I've made of myself!"

An outburst of tears followed this tirade. The young man placed his hand gently on the girl's shoulder, but she gave him a push that sent him spinning across the aisle.

"Can't you see that you're disgracing the two of us, Bessie?" he remonstrated.

"I don't care," came the angry reply. "You've disgraced me."

"But I tell you, dear, I never met that girl but once in my life."

"That doesn't make any difference. You kept it from me. Oh, oh, oh! My heart is breaking. I wish I was dead."

The other passengers were smiling at the tragedy. The conductor, chuckling softly, stopped to take Steve's ticket. "What's the big battle about?" asked the salesman.

"Just a little love scrap," answered the conductor. "It's a bride and groom. They've only been married about three hours. There's enough rice on his hat to make a pudding."

A contented expression settled on Steve's face, as he listened to the domestic discord. "I guess I'm a lucky man at that," he thought.

CHAPTER II.

A CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE.

ANNOUNCEMENT that dinner was waiting to meet all comers in the dining car, afforded the passengers a chance to escape the honeymoon wrangle which had reached the uninteresting "Yes, you did!" and "No, I didn't" stage. Steve, with an appetite that had never been known to flinch, hurried forward at the first call. Close at his heels was a pleasant-looking, smartly dressed chap of twenty-five or thereabouts, who had been seated directly across the aisle, and who had been enjoying the argument to the utmost. He caught Steve's eye when the salesman turned to get a look at the warring couple, as he started for the dining car.

"Looks like a finish fight," the stranger volunteered, with a laugh.

"I'll bet she gets the decision," returned Steve.

"That's a cinch. Going to be a few to dinner to-day, I guess."

He threw a thumb over his shoulder, by way of explaining the last remark. Steve looked, and saw the crowd surging toward the base of supplies.

"Takes more than a lover's quarrel to keep the merry travelers away from the lunch wagon," the salesman observed.

"Are you alone?" asked the young man.

"You bet," Steve replied. "I broke away from the nurse this afternoon."

Steve's rapid-fire delivery had made an instantaneous hit with the man behind him. He was laughing like a man who meant it when they entered the dining car.

"I thought we might have dinner together," the other suggested. "I hate to eat alone."

"You're on. Here's a bench that will hold two. Back in there and we'll give one of these waiters a chance to show his endurance qualities."

While they were putting the menu through the third degree, Steve shot a few covert glances at his companion, the inspection being impelled by a natural curiosity to classify the stranger. The first glance convinced Steve that his friend was not engaged in trying to sell anybody anything. His whole manner was that of a man who had never worried about the first of the month—or any of the other thirty days.

"What are you going to eat?" asked the stranger.

"Everything but the date line," Steve answered. "I'm as hungry as a stranded chorus girl."

"That's my case. I guess I'll let you do the ordering."

Steve proved that he knew his way around the pantry by nominating a dinner that won the hearty approval of the man across the table. Under its refreshing influence conversation came easily.

"How far South are you going?" the young man inquired.

"One block this side of the pole," Steve said, without a smile.

The stranger laughed. "Honest?" he inquired.

"That is a slight exaggeration," Steve went on. "But I expect to be gone ten weeks. I'll bet a dollar they have to send a relief expedition after me. And the worst of it is, I had this trip wished on me. The fellow that should have taken it got married to side-step the trip." Steve noticed the interrogation in the other's eyes, and made haste to explain. "My firm has always made a practice of sending unmarried men on

this journey," he continued. "I am the only unappropriated man on the traveling staff now, and they hung the job on me."

"Being a bachelor had some compensations," the other remarked.

"Meaning that battle in the car a little while ago?" Steve returned.

The stranger nodded. They laughed at recollection of the spat.

"She sure was handing him his," Steve said. "Trouble was waiting at the church for that guy. She'll have him rolling over, playing dead, jumping through—— Well, what do you know about this?"

Following the salesman's eyes, the stranger saw what had halted his predictions. The newlyweds were coming down the aisle of the dining car, the bride giggling, and blushing, and tossing her pretty head, and giving every evidence of being ridiculously happy; the youthful husband, his face wreathed in smiles, pushing her ahead of him in the gentlest manner.

"Can you beat that?" asked Steve.

"I'm getting kind of used to honeymoon scraps," his companion replied. "That's the second one I've witnessed in two weeks."

"You're lucky. Nothing I like better than a good fight."

"I had a ringside seat at the one I'm going to tell you about. It was up at Niagara Falls. I was on that boat that carries all the yaps out to the big shower when I heard a woman start to abuse a man something scandalous. He had forgotten to bring her parasol, and she let the whole world in on the secret that she had picked a citron. The situation was all the more ludicrous, because they were both past middle life. He made a mild bluff at maintaining his independence, but she backed him into a corner, and told him a few things. 'I'll show who's running this outfit, just as sure as your name is Skinner,' she——"

"Did you say Skinner?" interrupted Steve.

"That's what she called him."

"A tall, sandy-complexioned chap with a hairless mustache?"

"A perfect description of him!" exclaimed the stranger.

Steve unlimbered an exultant shout that startled his companion and the other diners.

"What's happened? What's the matter with you?" his friend asked.

"That's the best——" but Steve got no further with his explanation. He was off on another laughing expedition.

"That's the best news I've heard in a month," the salesman managed to break off between laughs.

His companion eyed him strangely. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, that story you were telling me about Skinner."

"Do you know him?"

"Backward. He's the chap I was telling you about. The one that got married to duck this Southern trip."

They both laughed at this explanation.

"Well, Skinner would be willing to change places with you now, or I miss my guess," the stranger said.

Steve shook his head sadly. "Poor old Skinner! And he thought he was putting one over on me. Honest, I could laugh for seven hours straight when I think of him."

"It is funny," his friend added.

"Funny doesn't describe it. It's a shriek. Maybe I won't have something to tell that bunch in the office when I write my first letter. Oh, we've got to blot up a quart of bubbles on the strength of that information! Oh, waiter! Bring us a bottle of that stylish soothing sirup."

The man across the table was having the time of his life listening to Steve's unique expressions.

"Before we proceed with the business in hand," Steve began, as the waiter filled their glasses, "I'm going to slip you my label. My name is Steve Blake."

Their right hands interlocked across the table. "Mine is Andrews—Tom Andrews," returned the other.

Each sip of wine brought their heads closer together; each glass found them getting more confidential. Most of the

conversation had been about Skinner and his matrimonial venture.

"Women are a queer lot," observed Andrews. "When they're not crying they're——"

"They're singing," interposed Steve. There was a far-away look in the salesman's eyes as he made the interruption. He had seen Martha's face in every bubble.

"Did you ever think seriously of the marriage game?" Andrews inquired.

Steve was just aching to unburden himself. "Not until a few weeks ago," he replied. "Then I met the finest-looking girl I ever laid eyes on. Gee, but she was a queen!"

Steve stopped talking. He was staring at the liquid in the bottom of the glass, a reminiscent smile on his face.

"How did it wind up?" asked Andrews.

The big salesman laughed softly. "The queerest finish you ever heard of," he answered. "We both lived in the Honeysuckle Apartments. For several weeks the tenants had been complaining about the wretched singing of some woman in the house. She used to start in at breakfast and keep it up all day. It was awful. I headed the petition to have her put out of the house. The night that I went to my friend's apartment determined to propose to her, I learned that she was the owner of the awful voice. I fled in terror. I had figured all along that a Mrs. Wild, a lemon-faced woman, was doing the singing. I found out that Mrs. Wild, her son, and a brutal-looking fellow named Gallagher were in the young woman's employ. She was paying them to listen to her singing so that she would get accustomed to singing before an audience."

Steve paused several times during the recital of his romance, expecting Andrews to burst out laughing. To his surprise, the face of his new friend bore an expression of pain.

"I thought I was going to hand you a laugh," Steve said.

Andrews appeared to be in anything but a merry mood. "What—what was the young woman's name?" he faltered.

"I don't mind telling you," said Steve. "She's a splendid girl, with a beautiful face, but the worst voice I ever heard in my life. Her name is Martha Lake."

Andrews appeared to be in a daze for a moment after he heard the name. Then he rose, excused himself abruptly, and left the car, leaving Steve staring after him in amazement.

CHAPTER III.

NEWS FROM HOME.

FOR the life of him Steve couldn't figure out why mention of Miss Lake's name should upset Andrews. The more he thought of it, the more he became convinced that the young woman's name had nothing to do with Andrews' strange actions and abrupt departure from the dinner table; that his new friend was thinking of something else at the time, and had asked her name simply because he did not want to appear inattentive.

"That's about the size of it," he concluded. He returned to the parlor car, intending to renew his conversation with Andrews, but on reaching there, was surprised to see that the latter had turned his chair away, and was busy studying the landscape, his attitude making it plain that he did not wish to be disturbed. Steve made a lot of noise when he plumped into his seat, but Andrews gave no sign that they had ever met before. His actions puzzled Steve more than ever. When the train reached Baltimore, Andrews picked up his bag, and left the car, bowing coldly to Steve, as he passed down the aisle.

Through the car window Steve saw Andrews enter a fine, big automobile. "Well, it beats all, the queer people there are in this world," the salesman said to himself. "Andrews must be there, with the green stuff. It takes a lot of coin to support one of those sassy-looking chariots."

On reaching Atlanta, the starting point of his business invasion, he made up his mind to hang up a new record for sales in the Dixie territory, this determination having two reasons for its

motive power—the desire to forget Martha Lake, and the ambition to increase the firm's confidence in his ability. In the latter effort he succeeded admirably; the former proved a miserable failure. His line carried him into the smallest towns and villages; he met all sorts of interesting characters—primitive mountaineers, quaint old darkies, and eccentric tradesmen—but none of his experiences was interesting enough to keep his mind off the girl in New York.

He found half a dozen letters awaiting him when he reached Greenville, South Carolina, two of them from Hinkle and Larrabee, offering hearty congratulations on the success of the trip up to date. Three of the letters were from the fellows in the office, informing him that they expected him to stop a few old shoes on his return. Trimble's letter contained a clipping which stated that a Hoboken justice of the peace had announced his intention of keeping his office open nights to accommodate the matrimonial rush.

"Married in Hoboken," chuckled Steve. "It would just tickle that bunch to death if I pulled the job off in that place. If I ever do get married, I'll rob those fellows of their chief amusement."

He fingered the remaining envelope suspiciously. It gave forth a perfumed scent, and appeared to be from a woman, but Steve knew the lengths his coworkers would go to to play a practical joke on him. He couldn't think of any woman that would be interested in him enough to waste a stamp and a lot of perfectly good ink. There was Miss Lake, of course, but there wasn't one chance in a thousand of her writing to him. Having ordered him from her home on the occasion of their last meeting, it wasn't likely that she was sitting up nights worrying about him. These were the thoughts that raced through his brain.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Trimble got one of the stenographers to write it. Well, I may as well learn the horrible details as quickly as possible."

He ripped the envelope open, and pulled out the missive; the fluttering sheets disclosed a gilt monogram at the top of the first page. Steve stood still, as the letters "M. L." danced before his eyes. Then it was no joke. She had written to him! There was no way in which his associates could have obtained her stationery. He had believed her to be in Europe, she having announced her intention of going abroad before they parted, but the letter had been posted at New York.

"I'll bet it's a first-class roast," he thought, as he straightened out the letter without looking at it. "She probably thought of a lot of other things to call me after I left that night, and she has shipped them to me by mail."

Slowly he lowered his eyes to the missive in his hand. The very first sentence thrilled him with delight. The letter read:

DEAR MR. BLAKE: No doubt you will be surprised to hear from me, but all along I have felt that I was a bit harsh with you on the occasion of our last meeting. It was only natural that I should have resented your unsympathetic attitude toward my singing, as well as your action in heading the petition to have me dispossessed, but in view of the fact that the members of my own family have opposed my vocal efforts at every turn, so much so that we have been estranged for some time, I have reached the conclusion that I acted unjustly toward you, and make haste to apologize.

I never realized that, possibly, you were one of those persons who do not appreciate good singing. I have been making such rapid progress under Professor Phinney that it won't be long before I shall be able to convince even the members of my family, not to mention others, that I have a wonderful voice. In my leisure moments I often recall the few pleasant times we had. I obtained your route from Hinkle & Co. I hope that your Southern trip is a great success. We are now living at the Finnegan Arms. Yours very truly, MARTHA LAKE.

Mere language is powerless to convey any adequate idea of Steve's happiness after reading that letter. The discovery, just as he was about to propose, that his ideal was the owner of the voice that had put the occupants of the Honeysuckle Apartments up in arms, was a jolt from which it had taken him some time to recover. At first he had congratulated himself on

his narrow escape, but the greater the distance he put between himself and the girl of his dreams, the more he became convinced that her singing was not so bad, after all. Now her letter all but made him sure of it.

"There may be something in what she says at that," he argued. "It may be that I haven't got an ear for good singing." Then he fell to thinking about the way the other tenants had rushed to sign the petition to evict her. "No," he concluded, "we couldn't all be off in our judgment. I guess she's got a cheesy voice, all right But she sure is a bully girl. If she would only have me I might get used to her singing in time. And besides, I wouldn't be home much."

CHAPTER IV.

BUSINESS SIDETRACKED..

ROMANCE had the right of way over business for several days after the receipt of that letter. Steve spent a lot of his time reading it, and framing up a suitable reply. His first impulse was to lay bare his heart on paper and forward it to the Finnegan Arms; but reflection convinced him that such a course would leave her an opening to slip him a laugh in case she was only joshing. So he sat down and filled the pages with a lot of polite nothings, hoped she was in good health, wished her success in her vocal efforts, and gallantly admitted that he didn't know the first thing about singing.

"That last admission ought to restore my picture to the mantel," he said, with a laugh.

As is the case in all parts of the country outside the metropolis, especially in the smaller towns, Steve's customers took a keen delight in poking fun at New York in his presence. He took it all good-naturedly, now and then coming back with a retort that stood the critics on their heads. Steve dropped into Platt's Dry-goods Emporium in Whittier, a Florida town of a few thousand, one afternoon, in time to hear three or four of the leading citizens putting the hammer on the big city.

"Here comes one of the inmates, now," shouted Hen Platt, owner of the store, as Steve squeezed through the narrow door.

"Hello, boys!" was the salesman's cordial greeting. "Have a rocket on me!"

He passed around a handful of cigars. One long-necked citizen took three.

"Must be going to have a party up your way," Steve said, with a smile.

Platt and the others got the significance of Steve's remark, and began guying the hoggish member.

"Any time I get a chance to take something from a New Yorker, I take all I can get," snarled the greedy one.

"I'll drop you a line the next time I'm coming, and you can bring a basket," said Steve.

The laugh that followed made the fellow mighty sorry that he had embarked in the wholesale cigar business at Steve's expense. Steve sought to mollify him by patting him on the back.

"The trouble with you New Yorkers is you think you know it all," the man complained. "That's just what we was talking about when you came in the door."

"That's what you're always talking about," Steve put in. "New York may not know everything there is to know, but I don't think Whittier can show her anything."

Platt, seeing that the argument was liable to take an unpleasant turn, broke into the conversation. "New York's all right," he said condescendingly, "but we was just discussing how fellows without anything at all go up there, and bluff their way to the front."

"They may get away with it for a while," Steve declared, "but it doesn't take people long to spot a counterfeit in the big village."

The salesman was surprised at the laughter that greeted this announcement.

"I know three men who couldn't make a living in this town because of their stupidity," Platt said, with a broad grin. "Bill Dingle, George Whitlock, and Dan Beebe were starving down

here. Now they are in New York, two of them coining money in the real-estate game, and the third running a chain of lunch rooms."

Steve shrugged his shoulders. "The stuff was in them, but they didn't have a chance down here," he argued.

All at once the man who had hogged the cigar treat released a succession of haw—haw—haws, his Adam's apple racing up and down his long neck at a great rate.

"What's eating you, Hank?" Platt chuckled.

"In mentioning the false alarms who left here, and made a big hit in New York, you forgot to mention Jim Phinney," Hank replied.

"Gosh, that's so!" came in a chorus.

Steve wondered where he had heard that name before. He couldn't recall at that particular moment, because his companions were laughing themselves into hysterics, as they thought of Phinney's career in Whittier.

"There's a chap with less ability, and more nerve, than any man in the world," Platt went on to explain. "Jim Phinney started to learn the plumbing trade, but made a mess of it. All the plumbers in town tried him, and then tied a can on him. He played the bass drum in the village band, and the first thing we knew he had blossomed out as a piano tuner——"

"Considerable jump for Jim," interrupted Steve. The salesman was laughing harder than any of the others.

"Wait!" exclaimed Platt. "After he had ruined half a dozen of the best pianos in Whittier, he had to take it on the run. He disappeared one day, and the next we heard of him he was giving vocal lessons in New York, and gathering the money in armfuls. If that isn't bluffing your way through, I don't know what is."

"Professor Phinney!" Hank shouted derisively.

Steve grabbed him by the arm. Now he knew where he had heard the name. Phinney was the fellow who was teaching Miss Lake.

"Professor Phinney," Hank repeated. "Why, he has fifteen or twenty of the wealthiest women in New York paying him ten and fifteen dollars for a half-hour lesson."

The information stunned the big salesman. In the light of what he had heard, he was better able to understand Miss Lake's persistence in the vocal line. This faker, this so-called professor, was robbing her, and making a fool of her at the same time. Steve felt that the long exile in the South was worth while, if the information he had obtained served to release the trusting young woman from the clutches of the bogus singing teacher. In order that no injustice should be done Phinney, Steve began plying those about him with questions concerning the erstwhile plumber-piano tuner's career.

"Did Phinney ever amount to anything as a singer?" Steve asked.

"He couldn't even whistle," answered Platt.

"He was the worst bass drummer in the world," added Hank.

Steve saw his duty clearly now. He rubbed his hands together gleefully, slapped Platt on the back, and laughed with delight. The others were at a loss to understand the cause of his mirth.

"Tell it to us," urged Platt.

"Oh, it's nothing," Steve said. "Give us some more of those Havana frankfurters."

Platt shoved his best cigars across the counter. Hank, deciding to play safe this time, took but one. Steve picked up half a dozen, and stuffed them in the countryman's pocket.

"What's this for?" Hank inquired.

Steve waved his hand at him as he passed through the door. "You've earned them, old pal," he replied.

CHAPTER V.

A FEW PLAIN FACTS.

ON reaching his hotel, Steve deliberated for some time as to the course he should pursue. He studied the situation from every angle, and at length decided that no time should be lost in apprising Miss Lake of the discovery he had made. So he sat down and

wrote a long letter in which he told her all he had learned about Phinney, taking great care to offer no criticism of her singing teacher, but leaving her to draw her own conclusions. He let her know that he had stumbled upon the information by accident; that he had felt she ought to know something about the man who was shaping her musical career; that the wish for her success was his sole reason for making her acquainted with the facts.

"I ought to write his name Phony, instead of Phinney," Steve muttered, when he had occasion to use the professor's name; "but it isn't up to me to put the acid on him. There's a bare chance that Miss Lake knows all about him."

Long after he had mailed the letter, Steve sat trying to convince himself that receipt of the information might cause the girl to abandon her hopeless ambition. He wouldn't admit it to himself, but the fact remained that he was hoping for just such a result, figuring that there would be a chance of his winning her after she had given up her career.

"There I go again," he said sarcastically. "Any one would think she was chasing me around trying to marry me. The minute she stops screeching there will be scores of good-looking fellows trying to drag her to the altar. But, then, no one can stop me from having a little dream."

He sighed wearily, and then forced his thoughts back into the channel of business. In the six weeks that he had been away from the office he had worked at top speed, with the exception of the day when he received Miss Lake's letter, several of the twenty-four hours succeeding that important event having been devoted to reading that scented missive. Steve knew the letter by heart. He found himself singing it now and then.

It would have been hard to convince any one in the home office that Steve had not put in all his time in the interest of the firm. The way the orders kept pouring in from the South kept the members of the firm gasping with astonishment. Before he had been out three weeks he had shattered all records for that territory. Indeed, Fred Hinkle, fearing that Steve might suffer a breakdown, wrote telling him it was not necessary to work so hard.

"I'm only loafing," Steve wired back. "When I get warmed up, the shipping department will be begging for mercy."

"He must be using a sandbag," observed Larrabee, when the order came in to send Jenkins & Turner of Pontiac, Florida, a carload of stock. Hinkle & Co. had never been able to do business with the Pontiac concern up to that time.

Two weeks having passed without any reply from Miss Lake, Steve concluded that she had looked upon his information as an attempt to meddle in her affairs. He felt like kicking himself for making such a stupid move just when it appeared that their pleasant relations had been resumed. This was his frame of mind when he entered the Ramsey House in Sanderson, Louisiana, one afternoon. He was just about to spread his signature across the register, when a line on the opposite page caused him to utter a sharp cry of surprise.

"Mrs. Wild and son," Steve read aloud. He wondered if it could be the woman with the sour face, one of the ill-assorted trio hired by Miss Lake to listen to her singing.

The clerk smiled at the salesman. "Did you know her?" he inquired.

"Is she a cranky-looking dame?" asked Steve.

"Worse than that. Looks as if her face froze when she was getting a tooth pulled."

"That's the one. There isn't another face in the world like that."

Suddenly it dawned upon Steve that Miss Lake and the other members of her private audience might be in the neighborhood. He ran his eye down three or four pages, but did not discover the names he was looking for.

"Is Mrs. Wild here now?" he asked eagerly.

"She left the day before yesterday."

"Who was with her?"

"No one but that imp of a boy if

you know him," the clerk answered. "He's the freshest kid I ever saw in my life."

Steve nodded. "I know all about him!" He was up in the air for some time after seeing the name on the register. Try as he would, he could not account for Mrs. Wild's presence in that part of the country. In the midst of his reflection he slapped himself on the knee. "That's the answer!" he declared. "Miss Lake received my letter, cut loose from Professor Phony, gave up her shrieking, and turned that roughneck Gallagher, Mrs. Wild, and her son adrift. It's the only way to account for that woman's appearance in this part of the earth."

Satisfied with this solution of the problem, Steve got busy constructing a few more air castles. The knowledge that he had been instrumental in bringing Martha Lake to her senses made him feel that he had some slight claim to her consideration. He was happier than he had been since the discovery that Martha's voice was no match for her beautiful face.

"Now that she's rid of that bunch of pirates she'll be a regular girl," Steve assured himself.

CHAPTER VI.

LONGING FOR BROADWAY.

EACH hour seemed a day to the happy salesman. Ten days more, and the trip would be at an end; he would be speeding toward New York, and the Finnegan Arms, the apartment house that sheltered the dearest girl in the world. He thought it strange that she had not answered his letters, but concluded that she was waiting until she could talk to him in person. He could not get interested in newspapers, magazines, funny stories, or anything else; he wanted to get back to Manhattan Island as quickly as possible.

"Anything going on in this deserted village to-night?"

Steve put the question to the night clerk in the Hotel Bartlett, the principal hostelry in Edgarville, Georgia.

"Not anything that's liable to give you a thrill," came the laughing reply. "There's some sort of a concert over in Gregory Hall. I don't think it amounts to much. They've been giving the tickets away. Take these, and investigate."

The clerk shoved half a dozen tickets toward the homesick traveling man.

"Thanks," said Steve. "I can waste a half hour or so over there."

He had no trouble finding Gregory Hall. It was only half past seven o'clock, but the hall was filled to overflowing, and there was a big crowd banked about the doors. Steve asked for a program, but the limited supply had given out long before he got there. By exercising all his strength, Steve managed to edge his way into the hall. A few seconds later he received a genuine surprise. In looking over the heads in front of him he spied Tom Andrews, the man he had met on the train the first day of his journey—the man who had left him abruptly in the middle of a conversation that had to do with the salesman's brief love affair.

Steve noticed that Andrews was a member of a distinguished-looking party, his companions being an elderly man of soldierly bearing, a sweet-faced woman, with snowy hair and aristocratic manner, and a pretty girl in her teens. It was such a group as one might see in a New York theater on an opening night, the attire of the quartet contrasting strangely with that of the country folk about them.

"This must be where Andrews lives," Steve concluded.

The first number, a well-played violin solo, furnished mild entertainment for the crowd. It was plain that their ideas ran more to moving pictures. When a piano player, with a mane like a circus horse, essayed to pick one of Mendelssohn's melodies off the keyboard, the crowd paid more attention to his hair than his performance. The storm of applause that preceded the appearance of the next performer, caused Steve to look about him in an effort to glimpse the name on somebody else's program. He was still engaged in this

direction, when a noticeable increase in the applause turned his eyes to the stage. He didn't need a program then. Martha Lake, more beautiful than ever, was standing before him!

Steve could scarcely believe his eyes. His breath was coming in quick gasps. It was as if he had seen an apparition. After the first shock of the surprise, Steve found himself trying to figure out Andrews' interest in her. A pang of jealousy shot through the big salesman, as he recalled that the man he met on the train had led the demonstration. The other members of the party had applauded vigorously, but Andrews had been on his feet cheering wildly.

"Now I understand his conduct in the train that day," Steve reflected bitterly. "He's been trying to win her, and was jealous when he learned that I had met her. It's funny that we two men should have met that way. He's a swell-looking chap, too. If she won't have him, I've got about as much chance as a one-armed Chinaman."

Further reflection along this line was halted when the orchestra began playing the prelude to her selection. Steve was at a loss to account for the girl's splendid reception. In his heart he hoped and prayed that her voice would justify the warmth of the welcome—that there had been a wonderful improvement in her singing; but he had his doubts.

The next instant his worst fears were realized. A succession of shrieks issued from the rosebud mouth, each one more distressing and ear-splitting than its predecessor. Steve had hard work restraining the tears, when he saw one person after another cover their ears. Three or four started for the door at the first screech; the end of the opening spasm found most of the audience in full flight. Undismayed, smiling easily, Miss Lake kept right on with the selection, now wailing like a lost soul, now screaming at the top of her voice.

"She's getting worse every minute," Steve said sadly.

His heart sank, as he realized that she had ignored his information concerning Phinney; that she was determined to pursue a career which could only bring ridicule to herself, and pain to her family. Now he knew why she had not answered his letters. She had resented his insinuations concerning her bogus singing teacher; had looked upon his well-meant interference as impudence of the worst sort. He had satisfied himself that Andrews was a suitor for the girl's hand, but he couldn't make out why the other members of the Andrews' party should be so interested in Martha. All four appeared to be exhausted from applauding her.

He would have given anything for the privilege of a few words with her, but he concluded that he had better keep his distance. Her failure to communicate with him after he had made it plain that he was trying to do her a favor, convinced him that she had rejected him for all time.

"She'd probably call a cop if I approached her," was his conclusion. "No; I'll have to suffer in silence."

Most of the seats on the lower floor were vacant when Martha began her second attack on one of the old operatic arias. Steve stood it a few seconds, and then plugged his ears. From his position in the rear of the half-darkened auditorium, he could see the expressions of horror on the faces of the few who had remained for the torture. Only the members of the Andrews' party were applauding now. The beautiful vision was in the middle of her second selection, when there was a wild scramble from the gallery. Up to this time, that part of the house had taken its punishment without complaining.

In a few minutes, the trouble on the upper deck had assumed the proportions of a small riot. Men came tumbling down the stairs, yelling and battling, to get to the street. Steve stepped to the foot of the gallery staircase in time to see two men engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight. There was something familiar about the neck and figure of the one who appeared to be on top at that moment. The muscular salesman reached down and separated the struggling pair.

"Hello there, Blake," came from the man who had been on top.

Steve looked at the badly battered face from which the greeting had come. "Gallagher!" he exclaimed.

"Righto!" came in a gruff voice.

Steve felt that Gallagher could enlighten him regarding Miss Lake's movements since their last meeting. He drew the hulking figure to one side, and slipped a bill into his hand.

"Buy yourself a couple of acres of sticking plaster," said Steve.

Gallagher grinned. "I'll need it if I stick with this outfit very long," he replied.

"Are you still working for Miss Lake?"

"Sure thing. What brings you down this way?"

"Peddling dry goods and notions," Steve answered. "Maybe you'll be so kind as to explain Miss Lake's presence here."

"With pleasure," Gallagher said, fingering the bill affectionately.

"Just a minute. Do you know anything about that swell-looking chap down there in the front row."

"That's Miss Lake's family," explained Gallagher. "The old fellow is her stepfather, Major Andrews; the woman is her mother, the other girl her sister."

"And the good-looking young chap?" Steve asked eagerly.

"Her stepbrother. Miss Lake's mother has been married twice. The Andrews family is the most prominent in Baltimore."

"I see," said Steve.

"Miss Lake has been on the outs with her folks for some time," Gallagher began. "Between you and me it's her own fault, though. They won't stand for her singing, and I don't blame them. She had made up her mind to go to Europe to continue her studies, and a few days before she was to sail she dropped a line to her folks in Baltimore telling them of her intention. In order to understand the rest of the story you've got to know that the members of her family idolize her."

Steve shook his head. "I can understand that," he declared earnestly.

"Major and Mrs. Andrews hurried to New York, and begged her to reconsider her determination about going to Europe. Her stepfather suggested that she make a tour of some of the smaller towns in this country, with a view to finding out just what the public thought of her singing. He agreed to finance the undertaking, and to do everything in his power to make it a success. If the audiences took kindly to her vocal efforts, he would offer no objection to her pursuing her studies abroad. Miss Lake jumped at the chance to appear in public, even in these little out-of-the-way places. Major Andrews wanted to get as far from Baltimore and New York as possible, because he didn't want the papers to get on to it."

"She's been drawing pretty good houses?" Steve queried.

"Major Andrews and his son have been tending to that part of it. They have been giving away tickets by the bale, but I don't think Miss Lake knows anything about it. You see the family wants to give her every chance in the world."

"How long have you been touring?" asked Steve.

"About two weeks, and, believe me, I'll be glad when we get back to the big town. I've had the toughest job of the lot. Major Andrews found that he couldn't fill the galleries, even by giving tickets away, so he delegated me to gather gallery audiences at fifty cents a head. They have been running out on me at every performance, not waiting for her to finish her first wail. Tonight I tried to hold them in check, and they mussed me up a bit."

"Aren't Mrs. Wild and her son working for Miss Lake any longer?"

Gallagher laughed. "You bet they are." He chuckled. "Catch that old valentine giving up such a good thing as this. Why do you ask?"

"I saw her name on the hotel register in Sanderson, Louisiana, a few days ago, and I was wondering if she had quit Miss Lake's employ."

"Mrs. Wild hopped over to Sander-

son while we were playing in Dickson," said Gallagher. "Her sister and family live down there, and she wanted to visit them. I'll bet they were so delighted to see her that they urged her not to stay. That old dame is the limit."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FAMILY CIRCLE.

GALLAGHER excused himself, and hurried to the street. Steve returned to the auditorium, coming face to face with Tom Andrews, just as he stepped over the threshold. The concert was over, and the Andrews family were making for the lobby.

"Why, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed Andrews. "You're the last man in the world I'd expect to see in this forsaken place."

"I've been making a specialty of forsaken places ever since I saw you last," Steve returned.

Steve was nonplused at the cordiality of Andrews' welcome. The young man drew Steve into the family circle, and introduced him all around. Major Andrews shook his hand warmly; Mrs. Andrews and her daughter did likewise.

"Martha has been amusing us with accounts of a lot of your experiences," Mrs. Andrews said. "She'll be awfully glad to see you."

Steve had his doubts about it. As a matter of fact, the surprises had been coming so fast he wasn't able to keep up with them.

"We're going over to the hotel to discuss to-night's serenade, and have a bite to eat," Major Andrews said, addressing Steve. "Come along and join us."

For once in his life the alert salesman was at a loss how to proceed. He decided to side-step the invitation, concluding that such a course would save Miss Lake much embarrassment. He was sure she didn't want to meet him again.

"Thank you for the kind invitation," he said, "but I couldn't think of butting into a family affair."

Andrews, junior, seized him by the arm. "Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "We'll be glad to have you. Martha wouldn't like it a bit if you stayed away."

The young man's earnestness took a load from Steve's heart. Andrews wasn't acting even a wee bit like a deadly rival. On the way to the hotel he took Steve into his confidence, telling him pretty much the same story that Gallagher had told him.

"Now you can understand my abruptness that day on the train," Andrews concluded. "I couldn't have discussed the situation with you without letting you know that I was related to the girl you were talking about. Martha's case is the only cloud on the family's happiness. We all love her, and have exhausted every honorable course to bring her to her senses."

"I understand," Steve assured him. "It's entirely too bad; she's such a bully girl."

When they reached the hotel, Major Andrews observed Steve looking about him in an expectant manner.

"Martha remained behind to discuss something with the members of her company," the major explained. "She'll be here any minute now."

Even as he spoke, she appeared in the doorway of the dining room. At sight of Steve her big brown eyes lit up with gladness.

"Well, well, well! This is indeed a pleasure!" she exclaimed, advancing, and extending her hand toward the big salesman. Steve forgot all about her wretched singing, then and there; he was enthralled by her loveliness.

"You don't feel half as pleased over the meeting as I do," he assured her.

He held her hand until Tom Andrews suggested, in his smiling manner, that they break away. Steve's heart was beating a joyous tattoo on his waistcoat.

"What kind of a trip have you had?" she asked.

"I've got no cause to complain," answered Steve.

"It seems to have agreed with you," said she. "You're looking fine."

"I can't see a single chance for im-

provement in your own looks," was his gallant rejoinder.

The conversation became general after that, Steve keeping them in roars with his pat expressions and humorous descriptions of persons and places. One by one the others withdrew, until Martha and Steve were alone at the table. One great fear possessed him. He was afraid that she might ask him for an opinion of her singing. He wouldn't think of fibbing to her; he hesitated about telling her the truth. After they had been talking some time, he realized that she had no intention of asking him to pass judgment on her vocal efforts.

"How do you like concert work as far as you've gone?" Steve mustered courage enough to ask.

"I'm infatuated with it," she answered enthusiastically. "We've had splendid houses everywhere. The way the people have turned out has surprised me. It isn't possible that any of these out-of-the-way places ever heard of me."

For her own good he wanted to tell her where the audiences came from, but could not do so without betraying Major Andrews' little secret.

"They get kind of restless at times," she went on. "To-night, for instance, lots of people went out during my first song."

The big salesman longed to take her in his arms and tell her the truth.

"I wouldn't mind that," was his encouraging observation. "You've got to get used to those little annoyances. I've seen them get up and walk out of the Metropolitan Opera House while the greatest singers in the world were warbling."

Her eyes beamed with gratitude. "That's what I tell mamma and the rest of them," she said. "Great singers school themselves to overlook such trifles."

Steve was eager to ask her why she hadn't answered his letters. He was particularly keen to know how she regarded his interesting information concerning her singing teacher. Her next question would make it appear that she had been reading his mind.

"I think you might have spared the time to let me know how you were getting on," she remarked.

"Didn't you get my letters?"

"I got one—the answer to the first one I sent."

"I wrote several others," said Steve.

"They never reached me. Where did you send them?"

"To the Finnegan Arms."

"That accounts for it," she said, with a laugh. "I moved away from there the day after I got your first letter. Probably I shall find them waiting for me when I get back to town. They must have been forwarded by this time. I've been away two weeks, you know."

A faint smile flashed across the salesman's face. He pictured the occupants of the Finnegan Arms demanding that she be dispossessed.

"Where are you living now?" he inquired.

"At the Ingersoll Apartments—upper Madison Avenue. I should be delighted to have you call when you get back to New York."

"I'll be there before the gates are opened," said Steve. "When do you expect to get home?"

Martha pulled a memorandum from her purse. "Let me see," she cogitated. "This is Wednesday, isn't it? I'll be home a week from to-day."

"And I'll get back to civilization the day after. How about Thursday night?"

"Suits me," she said, with a blush.

He was on the verge of telling her what he knew about Phinney, but decided it would be best to wait until they met again. By that time she would have read the forwarded letter containing the information, and he would be in a position to answer any questions she might care to ask.

As Steve was leaving town at six the next morning, he bade Martha and the others good-by when they came from the dining room.

"Thursday night," he said, pressing her hand.

"Thursday night," she returned, with her most bewitching smile.

He decided to press his advantage to

the limit. "I'll have something important to say when I see you," he whispered.

"I'm a good listener," came the blushing reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEVE IS WILLING.

FOR a man who had been counting the hours until he should land in New York, Steve Blake didn't appear to be in any great hurry when the train pulled into the Pennsylvania Station. Indeed, it had been several minutes before he gathered up his belongings, and handed them to a porter. He had lived in paradise for two days following his delightful meeting with Martha Lake, and remained in that blissful state until old sober second thought got busy.

Then it was that Steve began to kick the bedclothes over the dashboard. He spent a number of sleepless nights trying to decide whether he could be happy with a woman who spent most of her time shrieking like a siren whistle. Not that he didn't love Martha with all the fervor of his honest heart; that was the distressing part of it. He loved her so much that he didn't want to cause her one second's unhappiness; but he feared that life with her would be impossible, unless she abandoned her vocal designs. He felt reasonably certain that she understood his intentions toward her, under the import of the remark he had made when they parted the week previous. The long journey from the South had given him ample time for reflection along this line. So engrossed was he when the train reached the station, that he didn't notice his fellow passengers leaving the car.

"If I hadn't made that near proposal it wouldn't be half so bad," he said to himself, as a taxicab hurried him to the establishment of Hinkle & Co. in Chambers Street. "Well, I've got to go up there to-night, and go through with it," he concluded. "I've never quit in my life, and I don't intend to begin now."

His reception at the office was more vociferous than ever, Fred Hinkle leading the demonstration. Steve did his best to appear interested, but he couldn't get his old smile working properly.

"You've hung up a mark that other drummers will be shooting at for some time!" Hinkle declared with great enthusiasm.

Larrabee, the general manager, came up and offered his congratulations. "What under the sun has become of your smile?" he inquired.

"He does look rather glum," put in Hinkle.

Trimble, the auditor, chuckled. "It's too easy," he said. "The young man's in love."

The others laughed at this explanation.

"On the level, Steve, has anything gone wrong?" Hinkle asked.

"Not a thing," the salesman replied. "I guess I'm tired; that's all."

"You must be," the boss returned sympathetically. "Run away and play for a few days. Then come in and see me."

The grateful look in Hinkle's eyes made it plain that he was going to reward the big salesman for his splendid work. Steve reached his apartment about six o'clock, and spent the ensuing two hours in a final résumé of the situation that was worrying him. Soon after eight he arrived at the Ingersoll Apartments. He hesitated a moment; then started into the building.

"Here's where you lose your freedom, Stephen, old scout," he muttered, with a brave attempt at his customary breeziness.

"Who did you wish to see?" asked the telephone operator.

In his highly nervous condition Steve couldn't recall for a moment just who he did want to see. He fumbled at his collar, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and forced a feeble smile.

"Why—why tell Miss Lake that——"

"Miss Lake doesn't live here any more," snapped the operator. "She was put out at five o'clock this afternoon."

"Where did she go to?" Steve inquired, in a half-hearted way.

"I don't know, and I don't care. I

know where she ought to go, though. A boiler shop is the proper place for that nightingale."

Steve turned away, a peaceful expression on his face. On reaching the street, he paused, and looked up at the big apartment house.

"Well, it isn't my fault," he declared. "I was willing to go through with it."

Further adventures of Steve Blake will be narrated in the next issue. As this magazine is published twice a month, you have to wait only two weeks for any particular story that you wish to read. The Steve Blake Series began in the October 15th issue of TOP-NOTCH. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.

How It Worked Out

"MR. GRASP," said the bookkeeper, as he toyed nervously with a piece of red tape, "during the past week I have been doing the other clerk's work as well as my own."

"Well, what of it?" growled his amiable employer.

"This being pay day, sir, I thought it was only right to mention it."

"Very good. Let me see, your salary is ten dollars a week, and the other clerk's five dollars, I think?"

"Yes, sir," replied the bookkeeper, beaming expectantly.

"Then, working half the week for yourself is five dollars, and three days for the other clerk is two and a half. Therefore your salary this week will be seven-fifty. Very honest of you to mention the matter."

An Eye to High Finance

CHILDREN of to-day have an eye to the main chance. A man has a little daughter of whose character, strange to say, he has an exalted idea, and delights to put it to harmless tests. One day he said to her:

"My dear, a man this morning offered papa this room full of gold if he would sell him little brother. Now, that means gold enough to fill this room from wall to wall, and from floor to ceiling. If I sell little brother for that amount, I shall be able to buy you everything in the world that you want. Shall I sell him?"

"No, papa," answered the little girl promptly; then, before the delighted father could embrace her for expressing so much unselfish affection, she continued: "Keep him till he's bigger, and he'll be worth a lot more."

The President's Privilege

A DEAR old Irishwoman is the proud mother of a successful politician, who, no matter how busy he may be, never fails to write to the old lady regularly.

When he was in Washington last year he kept his mother duly advised as to everything that was going on. Finally there came a letter wherein he described his interview with the president. The old lady read it with eagerness, hardly able to restrain herself until she had told some one what had happened. When at last she got through the letter, she hastened to a neighbor's house and announced:

"I have just got a letter from Washington, and, do you know, the president has seen Richard!"

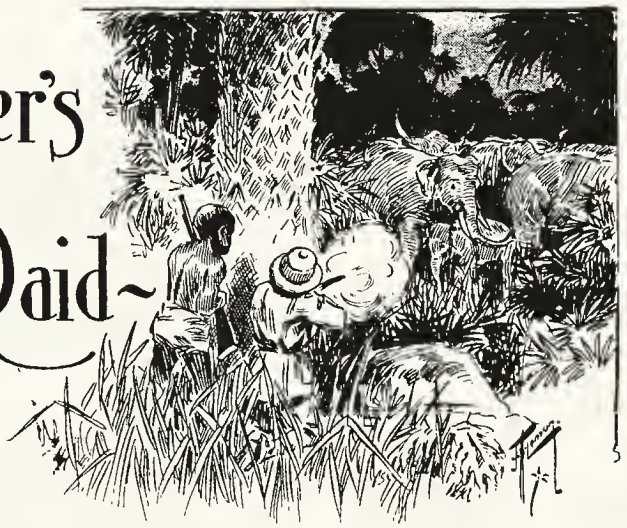
Too Exacting

CUSTOMER: "That coat I bought of you yesterday is full of moths."

Dealer: "Well, what do you expect for fifty cents—butterflies?"

Jim Roger's Big Raid~

By E. A. Morphy



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TURMOIL.

CLUSTERING in the shade of a clump of flat-topped acacias, the herd of elephants swayed and swung cumbrously—always apprehensive, always nervous, always listening, but practically blind in the glare. Every now and then some great bull tusker would flap his ears reverberantly, and his powerful trunk would wave upward into the hot air and feel about curiously. He was feeling, sniffing, for the taint of man or other enemy.

But the sultry, breathless day carried no scent. Slowly, inexorably, the white hunter crept upon his unsuspecting quarry.

As he sized up the herd, his eyes glittered with delight. There were hundreds of the mighty pachyderms—nearly a thousand of them—enough to trample down an army. There were big ones and little ones—baby calves that cuddled up to their bulky mothers, and war-worn tuskers skilled in the mysteries of the equatorial bush. The hunter was stalking for the mightiest of these latter, a splendid old bull, with tusks that must have weighted at least two hundred pounds apiece. In spite of the imminence of his danger, the heart of the hunter swelled with great content.

"Rogers, old socks," he whispered to himself gayly, "when you've got through with this little lot, you can make a bee line for home and California, with a quiet razoo as a side line when you strike the shady jungles of little old New York."

The hunter was gray-haired and gray-eyed and gray-bearded. He stood six foot six in his boots, and he had lived a dozen lives in the space of his three-and-sixty summers; but he still had the glad heart of a child.

Fearless? Of all pursuits under the face of the sun, none is even flecked with such peril, or bristles with such pure adventure as that of the professional elephant hunter. Withal, he must must be a man shy of all renown and glory. To earn his living he must be a lawbreaker.

The only accessible spots where herds may now be found in sufficient numbers to justify their pursuit as a means to wealth are controlled by powers who permit no white man to kill more than three or four elephants in a year.

The naked savages, with their pit-

falls and poisoned arrows, may kill as many as they like—cows, calves, or little bulls. All are good enough for meat. But the white man has to be a poacher. He must also be the commander of a small army. He must have carriers for his ivory—about thirty for each ton. He must have trusty men who can shoot well and readily to protect his carriers from savage enemies, human and of the wild. He must have all the qualities that make great generals and leaders of men, and, with these, he must be an outlaw. And such a man was James Ward Rogers.

Inch by inch, the hunter drew nearer to the great bull. The creature was scarcely thirty paces distant. Within a radius of a hundred yards were scores of others. They seemed amazingly huge and ponderous in the shimmering glare, but their tusks gleamed alluringly.

Click!

It was a noise no louder than that of a mouse in a larder. Some twig had broken, some leaf crackled, under the careful tread of the poacher.

Instantly the trunk of the great bull switched upward, pointing to where the white man crouched breathless and mute. The faintest little rumbling toot of warning puffed from the uplifted proboscis. In a second, eight hundred other trunks were uplifted—swaying eagerly, all pointing toward Rogers.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Sharply on the torrid stillness of the noon echoed the quick reports of the hunter's rifle, as, one after another in swift succession, he shot at three of the nearest bulls.

Then, with the fantastic celerity of a dream, the overpowering calm was transmuted into unspeakable commotion. A chorused roar, chaotic and terrible, of wailing calves and stentorian trumpetings smote the sky. The earth shook, as bulls and cows clustered and hustled in stricken terror to crowd the babies to the center of the crush. Great tuskers flung themselves through the brunt of the turmoil to the outside of it, whence the sounds of danger came.

Unwieldy, awful-looking mothers opened wide their leathery legs, calling to the little ones to run in for safety between them. Furious bulls, brave as Ajax, but helpless through short-sightedness, trampled and snorted and trumpeted; and then, as they smelled the smoke and the taint of man, and rushed to combat it, fell stricken with hurts incomprehensible.

For the moment, Rogers' business was to disable rather than to slay. He was a pothunter. His business was to get tusks. Ivory was what he was risking his life for. He aimed for the knee whenever he could, and with the first half dozen brutes—before any save those that were hit had located him—the task was easy enough. He knew that an elephant that is hit fair in the knee will drop, and he knew that once a wounded elephant drops he will never get up again. Therefore he aimed for the knee.

Splendidly calm and impassive behind him stood his gun "boy." He was a strapping big black, whom Rogers had trained in a school of thrilling danger. It was the boy's duty to keep behind his master with a rifle always loaded.

As Rogers snatched the fresh rifle, the boy reloaded the first one. He did so with infinite dexterity but absolute calm. He never looked up at the roaring maelstrom of elephants.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRE OF THE CHASE.

SIX great bull elephants lay prone and helpless. Three others came rushing at the hunter, trunks aloft, mouths open—great gaps of scarlet horror in the leathery blackness of their skins. Their little, red, piglike eyes were barely visible. Their immense ears flapped out wide in their wrath. One of them was a cow that had probably lost her calf. She trumpeted more shrilly than the other two.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Two of them went down, not five yards from the poacher. The cow continued her rush. Three more bulls broke from the tumultuous herd and rushed to help her.

In a trice all four of the monsters were on Rogers—within six feet of him—belching and trumpeting at him.

Rogers kept on firing. Into the actual zone of fire no elephant will go. He will dare almost anything; but the crack of the rifle terrifies him more than the hurt of it, and as long as the hunter can keep on firing the lifted trunk will not strike and destroy him.

The gun boy reached in dexterously and thrust a fresh rifle into his master's hand. Rogers gripped it automatically, and kept on firing. The boy again reloaded the discharged rifle, and again exchanged with the poacher. He never quaked, never quivered an eyelid. The squealing red mouths around him, the swaying trunks and the gleaming tusks might have been a thousand miles away.

Rogers kept on firing. The cow and one of the bulls drew back and heeled over. The second of the succoring tuskers went down in his tracks, shot through the brain. The third turned and fled—wounded sorely. Back from the now retreating herd jogged two other splendid tuskers. One on either side, supporting him, they hurried their stricken comrade in the wake of the fugitives.

Rogers stepped back a couple of paces and wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. His gun boy grinned respectfully. Ten elephants lay in front of them. The cow and two of the others were stone-dead. Taking a fresh rifle, the hunter went round swiftly and mercifully, and gave the other seven their coup de grâce.

Four of the quarry had immense tusks—larger than any Rogers had captured in three strenuous years. The other bulls had all good ivory, and so had the pugnacious cow, her sex being considered. Rogers viewed them complacently.

"There's work here for forty carriers," he reflected. "There's over a ton of ivory in it if there's an ounce! Wonder if the doc is within earshot?"

Then he sat down to wait. He knew that the noise of the fusillade had advertised his adventure miles away, and he was confident that some of his followers would come up with him inside the hour. If his friend, Doctor Calladine, was with them, so much the better. It would be good to show him this particular kill. Then he would start out after the herd and the wounded tusker. He would hunt them till the bunch were so shy that the twinkle of the stars would scare them. Then he would hike out of Africa and quit elephant hunting for good.

Where the herd had been resting was a veritable quagmire. Their trail stretched like the path of a cyclone to the westward. Rogers knew they could travel sixty or seventy miles a day, but he would tire them.

The rain that had been pouring intermittently for weeks again began to fall with true tropical earnestness. It shut out the view like a curtain. From out of its depths trotted, first two and then three, then maybe a dozen of the native porters, who cheered and grunted gladly at the scene of victory, and quickly set about cutting out the tusks. They were soon joined by others.

"Is the doctor coming?" Rogers asked one of the armed headmen.

"The doctor comes. He has spoken with a messenger, and has news for the commandant."

"The deuce he has!" muttered the leader. "Now, what sort of news can he have wormed out of the Lado Enclave in this sort of weather? There ain't a Britisher this side of Mongalla."

He sat down on the stiffening leg of the dead cow elephant and let his thoughts run loose. While he was thus pondering, a fresh group of hunters loomed up out of the mists of the downpour. Leading them was another white man—short, wiry, and sparely built, with a face of great refinement and intelligence. His brown beard was neatly close-cropped. His eyes were peculiarly dark and piercing. He showed none of the signs of hard living and exuberant animal spirits that distinguished Rogers' every feature. He lacked the splendid truculence—the inborn spirit of domination that shone from the face of the poacher.

"Hello, doc!" cried Rogers cheerily,

as he stood up and advanced to meet his comrade. "Cock your eye over this and go dream of it. There's eight thousand dollars' worth of ivory in it if there's a red cent, and there's twenty thousand dollars more to be got out of the herd when I get up with 'em again. I've winged one buster that's as big as the best of these. You see to the camp and these chaps. I'll take my gun boy and half a dozen carriers and follow the trail."

The gigantic hunter had been on the run in the sweltering heat since before dawn. It was now long past noon, but the fire of the chase was in his heart. Despite his threescore years he was tireless.

Doctor Calladine sat down on the foot of the cow elephant from which Rogers had just risen. "It's no go, Jim," said he. "We quit that herd here and now. We've got to pick up our feet and bolt!"

"We've what?" blurted Rogers.

"Cut and run for it, old man," repeated the doctor. "The old chief has sent a runner after you from Nimule. Somebody has blown the gaff and given us away. There's an expedition chasing us from Mongalla. It is only one white officer, with a white sergeant and a party of twenty or thirty all told—not more than half a dozen rifles. The Nimule fellows have sent them on a wild-goose chase after us to Montwati, but they're still chasing us just the same, and they are the deuce and all to stick."

The old adventurer looked down at his companion dazedly. The rain poured in rivers from his clothes and his battered hat. He handed his rifle to the gun boy who still followed him, and sat down facing Calladine on the other foot of the dead cow elephant.

"It's hard, doc!" said he. "Those beggars don't want the ivory! His blinking joblots the King of England don't want it! I want it bad, and I got it! And then they go and send a wall-eyed toy soldier chasing me with a bunch of Fuzzy-Wuzzies, to hound me like a rat!"

He buried his face in his great brown hands. Presently he looked up again. "You're right, though, doc! The beggars stick like leeches! I'll give that snoozer a run for his money, all the same. We'll light out into the Kongo Free State. I don't like quitting this herd and the wounded tusker, but we'll light out for Belgian territory, and be over the border before that Willie boy catches us up!"

CHAPTER III.

FOX ON THE TRAIL.

CAPTAIN C. V. FOX, inspector general of the Mongalla Province, read his orders, looked at his map, spoke to his orderly, and cast aside his cigarette.

Glory be! There were still sportsmen on earth—still weavers of trouble! Another three months of this slackness would finish him. Providence in its wisdom had sent surcease to his sorrow. Here was a hulking Yankee—some driveling Californian filibuster, who had been defying all the laws, human and divine, for the past three years, with never a soul to hinder him—stripping the elephants of the Lado Enclave, and selling the ivory as saucily as an Arab trader.

Fox's orders were to arrest this man, if he could, and capture his ivory. Collar the beggar? Of course he would collar him! What on earth did those Brass Hats at Entebbe think he would do?

He screwed his monocle into his eye, and stretched his seventy-four inches of strong manhood. He was thirty-two years of age, and had been through half a dozen campaigns that no man out of Africa ever heard of. In each of them he had found mention in dispatches. It was all the reward he got.

"The blighter!" he repeated, working himself up into a suitable spirit of rancorous indignation. "Wonder if he's had any luck? Got to be no end of a sportsman to hunt those bally tuskers on his lonely and make a living out of it. I wonder what it will be like, chasing him in that giddy Enclave. Our

Johnnies haven't got any map of the place yet."

Captain Fox organized his army in four hours, and set forth on the long quest. His force consisted of a sergeant, six Sudanese soldiers, eight carriers, and seven mules. With these, he marched to the eternal swamps of the Nile, and through them—through incessantly dripping and pest-ridden grasses, full twenty feet high—to Nimule, which is on the Uganda and Mongalla side of the Nile, some ninety or a hundred miles north of Lake Albert Nyanza, and nearly opposite Dufile in the Lado Enclave. That took a fortnight—a fortnight of sultry swamp, and wet, and insects, and leeches, with no rest or diversion of any kind.

The Nimule people professed to know nothing definite about the poacher, but had an idea that he had gone to Montwati, so to Montwati the pursuers went, only to be told that Rogers was in Lado.

North, through measureless swamps and jungles, and over many mountains and through unmapped rivers, Fox marched nearly two hundred miles to Lado, where they heard a rumor to the effect that the white hunter and his three hundred men were at a village not many hours' march away. Fox marched to the village, where he found strange men, atrociously tattooed, who absolutely refused to converse with his party. But the soldier knew that he was now fairly on the trail.

Two days later he came upon a deserted camp with fires freshly lighted —so as to deceive the pursuers—by natives friendly to the American, or by some of his followers who had been left behind for the purpose. The camp consisted of two tents and forty well-built huts, so that Fox knew that reports as to the strength of Rogers' expedition had not been exaggerated. Cheerfully he pushed ahead with his sergeant, his six black soldiers, his carriers, and his mules.

Then, in full earnest, the troubles of the man hunter began. The rain poured incessantly; storms burst through the sodden gloom of primeval jungles, and blew his tents to tatters. As the weeks passed, the party's stores diminished. In time they vanished utterly, and the expedition had to subsist upon whatever the jungle would yield. Hideous, ape-like men, hairy-chested and with sharpened teeth, jeered and mocked at them from trees and other eminences, barking horribly like baboons.

With inconceivable diplomacy and matchless skill, Rogers and Calladine had bribed these creatures with elephant meat and other luxuries, and had warned them against the English officer and his party, whom they described as oppressors of a venomous breed, crafty and unspeakably vile.

The uniforms of the inspector and his men hung on them in rags. The quinine gave out, and fever stalked among them. But never for a day did the chase waver. Fox pushed on, hither, and thither, through marshes and forests, through icy torrents and over terrible defiles, until one afternoon they came to a river with a wrecked bridge over it—wrecked by Rogers. And the natives—who seemed friendly enough—gave them the glad tidings that the hunter and his gang were encamped in a village not a dozen miles to the southward.

Sending three men ahead to reconnoiter, Fox waited to see his little party safely across the swollen flood. He was in rags—a mud-stained scarecrow. He had been marching in the same clothes for six weeks. Somewhere, far in the rear, a baggage train was following with medicine and raiment and food, but it could not catch up.

Fox felt so profoundly unkempt that at the last moment he faltered. He was ashamed to approach a white man in such a garb by the light of day. He decided, therefore, to tackle the poacher by night.

CHAPTER IV.

OUT OF THE BUSH.

BY the precious light of a candle, Rogers and Calladine sat smoking and chatting together. Their army of guards and carriers prattled among

themselves in the great village square. Nearly ten tons of ivory was stacked under the eaves of the house, or beside it.

"It was a close call, doc!" said the big poacher; "but we did give that Willie boy a run for his money. I can just see him laugh when he gets to the river and finds we're safe on the Belgian side of it!"

"You're quite sure this is Belgian territory, Jim?" queried the doctor. "There can be no mistake about it, you say? That fellow, whoever he is, has stuck to the trail like a leech. If there's any doubt at all, he'll follow us here."

"There ain't no doubt, doc," replied the poacher. "I've been here before—with the ducks from Nyangara, when they proved this river was a Kongo tributary. We're now on the spot where the thirtieth degree of east longitude crosses the fourth parallel, which means we're ten miles south by west on the Belgian side of the frontier. You don't catch your Uncle James making any errors on that lay when it concerns fifty thousand dollars worth of good ivory.

"Great snakes! What's that?"

Loud, through the still shadows of the night, came the shrill shouts of angry men and the sharp snap of rifles. The Americans leaped to their feet with a bound.

"Great Heavén!" grunted the giant adventurer. "If the hounds haven't followed us here and invaded Belgian territory with armed soldiers! Come on, doc, and we'll make 'em repent!"

The two men tumbled out into the night.

The darkness was inky. Here and there an orange flame stabbed the night, and a sharp echo rattled through the square. No enemy was visible.

"What is the matter?" demanded Rogers.

One of the guards saluted respectfully. There were three strangers in the bush. They came and peeped into the village. They were Sudanese and they had rifles. They were indubitably the English police. Therefore the guards had fired upon them.

The rattle of musketry continued. Now and then an answering shot rang out of the jungle shadows.

The poacher turned to Calladine. "What do you think of it, doc?" said he. "What shall—— Eh! Stand by, doc!"

The giant staggered. He dropped the rifle he had snatched up as he rushed from the house.

Calladine took his arm.

"It's O. K., doc! I'll make the house O. K. But they've potted me. Got me fair and square. They've fixed up old Jim Rogers!"

The firing ceased. The jungle again was absolutely still. Rogers walked slowly back to the house, leaning on his friend's arm. He was shot in the groin. They laid him on the truckle-bed, and the doctor examined him.

"Don't bother, doc," said the poacher. "Haven't I seen enough shooting to know when I'm fixed? How long may I live?"

The doctor shook his head. "You've wonderful vitality, Jim," said he. "At present I can't tell. But you ought to be good for days yet."

"Maybe that's as well," assented the poacher. "I always wanted to die quick, but there's one or two things I'd like to settle with you about these goods before I snuff out. Bring in the boys, will you?—the old fellows, I mean, that's been hunting with me these years past. I want to tell 'em to play square by you when I'm gone. Give me a blanket first. I'm feeling cold."

By the flickering glimmer of the candlelight, the men filed into their wounded master's latest abode, and shrank respectfully into the corners and under the eaves of the spacious hut.

Rogers lay on the camp bed with a red blanket over him. "I'm going to quit you, boys," he began.

Even as he spoke there came the sounds of a new commotion in the village square. Voices were raised in high command and gusty argument. Rogers looked inquiringly at the doctor.

"There are a hundred armed guards lined up outside," exclaimed the latter. "I put them there for fear of accidents. We are safe as a bank now. You know

there are only eight rifles with the police."

More jabbering echoed from the darkness. Then came the unmistakable tramp of a white man marching across the square. Rogers' keen old gray eyes again sought those of the doctor.

At that moment the voice of an Englishman rang out clearly from the square:

"James Rogers!

"James Rogers!" it repeated.

"James Rogers!

"If James Rogers is within, will he please come out!"

CHAPTER V.

A MENACING COMPANY.

ALONE in the middle of the clearing —a scarecrow in rags and tatters —the king's officer stood with cocked rifle, and summoned the American poacher.

"Give me my gun, doc," said Rogers, "and tell that geezer to come in."

One of the armed guards went out to interview the Englishman. "The commandant wants you to come in," said he. "He is sick, and cannot come out to you."

From somewhere among his rags and tatters Fox produced a monocle. He screwed it into his eye and peered at the black boy. "The commandant is sick?" he queried.

"The commandant is sick," again declared the boy, and Fox felt that he was speaking truthfully. Laying down his rifle by the porch, he followed the messenger into the hut.

At first he could see nothing. Then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the flickering gloom, the whole scene was revealed to him. There was a dead silence. In one corner, facing him, the poacher lay under his red blanket, glaring at the newcomer through eyes ablaze with pain and anger.

By the side of the bed stood another white man, rifle in hand—grave, stern, reproachful. Crowded around in the shadows stood a company of menacing blacks, rifles in hand, panting with rage, glowering, eager for vengeance.

"Trapped!" thought Fox, as he advanced to the center of the room. "Which of you gentlemen is Mr. James Rogers?" he said aloud.

Calladine stepped forward a pace nearer the candle. "This is Mr. Rogers," said he, pointing to the wounded adventurer. "He has been shot."

"Shot!" exclaimed Fox.

For the first time the sick man addressed his pursuers. "Yes, shot!" said he. "And by your boys. Do you mind coming nearer and standing by the light? I want to have a look at you."

The scarecrow officer advanced into the center of the little halo of candlelight, the doctor standing beside him. Looking down on his host, Fox saw that the man held a revolver under the red blanket, and that it pointed at his stomach. He had no doubt as to Rogers' absolute accuracy of aim and general excellence as a marksman.

"I am sorry to hear you are hit, Mr. Rogers," said he, with unaffected politeness, "and I hope it's nothing serious. But you are wrong in blaming my boys for it. There were three of my police reconnoitering ahead, but I am sure they would never have interfered with you."

The amazed natives—eager to see the end—leered at the intruder, and wondered why the commandant was so slow to shoot. Rogers' eyes blazed fiercer each moment as he glared at the haggard tatterdemalion before him; for Fox was starving, and dry with fever, as well as covered with rags and dirt.

"What brings you here to arrest me?" he demanded.

Fox looked around and coughed apologetically. "You're a wounded man, Mr. Rogers," said he. "Don't you think we had better let all that palaver rest a while until you are better?"

Rogers made a brave endeavor to sit up. Calladine stepped to his side to restrain him. Fox could see the firm hand under the blanket take a tighter grip on the revolver.

"No!" said he. "I won't wait. I can't! I'm a dying man, I guess. I

didn't think that they'd ever kill old Jim Rogers. Who the deuce are you, and what did you want to arrest me for? I want the confounded thing fixed up right here and now!"

Fox drew himself up. He, too, knew how to get shot like a man if his time came. But he was sorry for this giant —a bigger man than himself—whose dying eyes now blazed at him in helpless anger.

"My name is Fox," said he. "I am a captain in the British army. You were poaching in the Lado Enclave. It is not by choice I come here with the king's police to molest you!"

The poacher lay back and cackled derisive laughter. "Captain Fox," he gasped, "you are a young man. You have killed me. You've fooled yourself. You are now on Belgian territory. You have invaded the Kongo Free State with your king's black men! I wish I was well enough to teach you what a fool you are. Great snakes! Go away, man, or I'll shoot you!"

The hand with the revolver quivered. The black boys murmured in the shades. The wounded man gasped in a new paroxysm of pain and anger.

"I'm sorry to see you so ill, sir," said Fox gently, "and of course I'll be off. But let me tell you, as a hunter and a sportsman, that I have my duty to do. Look at me in the rags I stand in. Do you think it is a joy to me to come here in this fashion and find you a sick man on your back? I don't care a tinker's benediction if I'm in Belgium or Jericho. I had to come up with you, and now it is done. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you."

Gravely saluting the sick man, and without as much as a glance at the wondering guards, who clutched their rifles in the shadows, he turned on his heel and marched out of the hut.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "LAST POST."

ROGERS turned over in his bed wearily. "I'm too tired to palaver the boys to-night, doc," said he. "Tell 'em to quit."

Calladine bade the followers go outside, and he took away the wounded poacher's revolver. "It's as well you didn't use it, Jim," said he. "I hope you won't want it if he comes here again."

"I don't want it, doc," said Rogers. "I like the boy. He's well plucked. I guess he could hunt elephants."

The night wore to dawn, and the day came, and the sunshine. For the first time in weeks the rain clouds faded from the sky.

Fox waited for his transport, and when it came he changed his clothes. Then he found that what the wounded poacher said was true. He had chased him into Kongo territory.

The situation was a delicate one, but Fox did the proper thing. He decided to stay by his wounded quarry while he dispatched a messenger to the nearest outpost to notify the Belgian officials there of his mistake. Then again he sat down to wait.

In the middle of the night, Rogers' gun boy came to his tent hurriedly. His commandant was dying, and had sent to ask the captain to visit him before the end.

Greatly wondering, the officer accompanied the boy back to the house, where again a lighted candle accentuated the gloom, and the doctor still sat by the wounded poacher's bedside. There now seemed to be a diffidence between the two comrades of the wilderness.

"Sit down, cap," said the sick man courteously. "I've got but few words to say, and short time to say them in. I want the doctor here to be witness to them. I want him to note that I'm surrendering to you—to the Sudan government. I'm sorry I talked rough last night; but I'm an old man—very old—and I was angry."

He held out his mighty hand. It was with an effort he moved it. Fox bent over and clasped it.

"I guess we're different in many ways, cap," the old man continued, "but we understand each other, you and I. We understand what sends men fighting and wandering. Some don't. I want

you to see that my friend, the doctor here, gets into no trouble over this. He's not to blame for any of it."

He turned and smiled at Calladine. He still held Fox's hand. Now he paused—his breath made a queer, grating noise.

"Say, doc, did you hear that? That's the death rattle. Heard it too often to make any mistake about that!"

He turned his glance to the Englishman. There was in it the admiration of one brave man for another—something of the joy that lights the face of an exile when, after many years, he meets one of his own kind and kin.

"Say, cap," he murmured, "you're a big, strong fellow, sure! Do you mind lifting me up once more—for the last time? I'll not be here to-morrow. I'm still pretty heavy, ain't I?"

Fox lifted him in his strong arms.

Next day the Belgian commandant and two of his officers came and said civil things to Fox and Doctor Calladine.

It was the poacher's own men who dug his grave, but it was Fox's six Sudanese who fired three volleys over it, and the sergeant, who had once been a bugler, got a bugle from the transport and blew the "Last Post."

It was the sergeant, too, who subsequently reported a slight disaffection among the starved and fever-racked squad that had followed their officer so faithfully and so bravely during the two awful months of the pursuit.

"They didn't seem to like it, sir," explained the sergeant. "Being blacks, they didn't see why they should salute the gent when he was dead, seeing they tried so hard to kill him when he was living. Sure, they're good boys, only they're blacks, and don't understand such delicacy of sentiment, sir; so I belted them over the head."

Fox sallied forth and paraded his men, and spoke as he had never spoken to them before. They squirmed under the lash of his tongue:

"If ever again I hear of you shirking the salute to a brave man that is dead," he warned them, "I'll not take a single mother's son of you on the next picnic. I'll make every blessed one of you stay at home, and stew with the goats!"

Welcome Rain

THE Chinese in Shanghai had good reason to believe that a miracle was happening one day when it rained rice. From ten o'clock at night until well after midnight groups of Chinese were on their knees scraping together the grain which, like a gift from the gods, fell in showers.

The explanation of the miracle was that some miles away the roof of a granary had been swept off by a typhoon, and the grain had been whirled for miles by the same agency, to fall in showers when and where the force of the wind abated.

Spotted on the Film

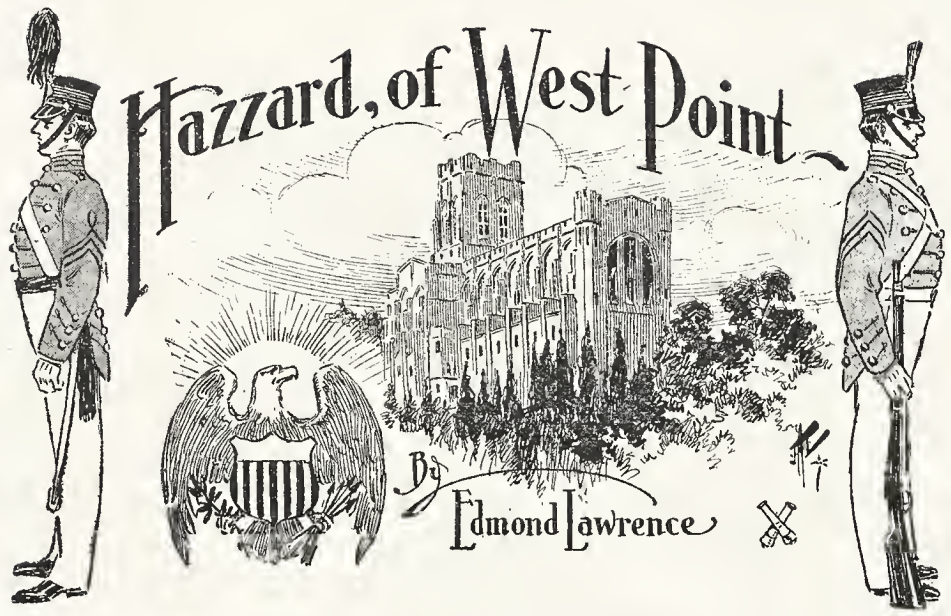
A WOMAN employed at a Michigan moving-picture theater has just traced her husband, who disappeared ten years ago on a hunting trip, and whom she had given up as dead, by means of a film. She was witnessing a picture showing a political parade, when she recognized her husband as one of the participants, and she was convinced in her belief after a portion of the film had been enlarged.

Needed a Heart Speedometer

SHE: "You ought not to put your arm round me; you have hardly known me five minutes."

He: "I feel that I have known you years, darling."

She: "You are exceeding the speed limit."



CHAPTER I.

THE MASKED CADET.

ROBIN BLAIR, a plebe on his first night of sentry duty at Cadet Camp, ran down Post No. 3. A rustle in the shadowy underbrush some distance to the left was the cause of his alarm. It was one hour after taps—eleven o'clock. A full moon bathed in silver all West Point—the plain covered with white tents, the deserted academy buildings, and, beyond, the Hudson, winding seaward below Storm King and Crow's Nest.

The only sounds since taps had been the regular footbeats of the cadets on the sentry lines which girded the camp with a ring of protection. But now came this disturbing rustle in the brush, and no answer to Blair's challenge. Fort Clinton Ditch, built by the Revolutionary soldiers to defend the Hudson, runs parallel with the path of Post No. 3. At its bottom, in the shadow of the bushes, some one seemed to be hiding.

Suddenly, another noise, still farther to the left, attracted Blair's attention, and he rushed to the spot. Behind his back, a figure in cadet uniform broke from cover of the brush. He had thrown a stick into the bushes several yards away to deceive the sentry. Now he was dashing through the lines to reach the camp before Blair discovered the ruse.

It was a favorite West Point trick, and should have worked on a plebe—a cadet in his first year. But the gray-clad figure made too much noise. The plebe sentinel heard. He wheeled around and challenged him.

It is a serious matter at West Point to leave camp without permission, and to attempt to steal back through the sentry lines. It is called "frenching." If the frencher is caught, he may be punished with demerit marks, reduction in rank, or even court-martial. The frenching cadet, therefore, was desperate to get back to camp without being caught. Hence, Blair's command was not heeded. Instead of halting, he sprinted faster than ever.

Blair was long-legged and agile. The handicap was not too much for him, and he overhauled the fleeing cadet and shoved the barrel of his rifle between the other's flying legs. The frencher tripped and fell heavily.

"You will, will you!" the plebe sentinel gasped, as he looked down triumphantly at the fallen cadet.

The frencher scrambled to his feet, trembling with exhaustion and anger. "Why, you miserable plebe!" he raged. "How dare you trip me up like that! Dow dare you stop me—me, an upper classman?"

A handkerchief tied over the lower part of the frencher's face concealed his identity. The mask and the man's fury surprised the sentry. The frencher was quick to see the advantage; the new cadet could be bullied.

"Plebe!" he stormed. "How dare you stop me?"

"I—I—er—my instructions," Blair stammered helplessly.

"Instructions—rot! Don't you know it's against the cadet code to stop an upper classman? Don't you know that your duty as a low-down plebe was to look the other way when I passed? I could make your life miserable here at the Point if I told the other cadets what a fresh know-nothing you are!"

At this threat the plebe turned pale. He began to believe he had made a mistake in stopping the upper classman. Doubt and uncertainty were pictured on his face.

Eager to take every advantage, the frencher shrugged his shoulders and started to walk jauntily past the plebe sentinel. But Blair was not yet convinced. Again he halted the cadet.

"No," he managed to say, although his voice was husky with the effort; "you are under arrest. I can't let you enter camp without reporting you. What you say may be true, but I was instructed otherwise."

The frencher hesitated. The plebe was proving harder to bully than he had thought, but he was determined to get by. He turned on the stubborn sentinel furiously.

"Well, you certainly are a fresh plebe. But you're going altogether too far. If you don't let me pass I'll have you hazed; I'll have you sent to Coventry. You'll be ostracized; you'll be disgraced; your life will be made so miserable here you'll have to quit. Understand?"

Blair stepped back before the other's fury. "I ought not to let you pass," he said.

"Oh, forget it, old man," said the frencher soothingly, as he once more started toward the tents of "A" Company, just across the lines.

Suddenly a cool, steady voice of command, coming unexpectedly from behind the two cadets, made the frencher stop abruptly. "Stop! You can't get by like that. You're under arrest."

The frencher wheeled about, his eyes gleaming with mingled anger and surprise at this unlooked-for turn of events.

"What luck!" he snarled. "A 'tac,' of course!"

He thought the man in the shadow of the bushes by the ditch was a tactical officer; that is, a regular army officer on duty at the post of West Point.

The plebe sentinel turned his attention to the newcomer. "Who goes there?" he challenged.

"Officer of the day," came the quiet answer.

"Hazzard!" exclaimed the frencher, with unconcealed chagrin.

"Advance, officer of the day, to be recognized!" said the sentry.

Cadet Captain Roderick Hazzard stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight, and came forward. Pleasing of countenance, tall, lithe, and muscular of figure, he made a splendid appearance in his trim summer uniform. Ranking highest in civil engineering, and soon to be graduated into the Uniter States corps of engineers, he had been nicknamed "Pontoons," but it was a title of respect, for Pontoons Hazzard was admired for his ability, and liked for his pleasing ways. As officer of the day, it was his duty to take charge of the situation in which he found the frightened sentinel and the bluffing frencher.

"You are under arrest, sir," he said to the upper classman. "I will report you for your conduct in trying to intimidate this sentinel."

He turned to Blair. "My boy," he

said, although the sentinel was almost as tall as Hazzard, and certainly not much younger, "you have been at the Point only two weeks. That is your only excuse for believing this bluffing frencher, who took advantage of your ignorance. His threats were cowardly; I heard them all. They will not hold water here. When the cadets find out what he threatened to do, he, and not you, may be run out of West Point."

"Oh, see here, Pontoons," broke in the masked cadet, "don't make so much over this. Every cadet frenches once in a while. I can't stand a hundred demerits at this time; it'll break me. I can't stand to be reported. That's why I shot off my mouth so much. It's the only reason."

"Address me as 'sir,'" said Hazzard sternly. "I don't like your familiarity under these circumstances. Take that handkerchief off your face!"

The masked cadet stepped back before Hazzard's curt command. Then he turned on the plebe sentinel covertly, while removing the handkerchief.

"If it wasn't for you, you butt-in, I'd have got through easily," he whispered. "I'll get you for this! You wait and see!"

"I heard that," said Hazzard quietly, "and I want to say that you'll do nothing of the kind. You won't harm this plebe; I'll see to that. I give him my word that I'll protect him from you. You'll have to buck me, and if you touch him I'll give you double."

The big frencher drew himself up in a fury. His face was still concealed by the heavy shadow of the trees. "Let me tell you, Hazzard," he muttered, "I'm going to get even with you for to-night's work; you and the plebe, too. In spite of all your popularity, I'll run you out of West Point in disgrace. Don't forget that!"

Hazzard laughed. He reached out his hand to grasp the handkerchief which the man still held near his face. But suddenly he stopped, for the frencher gasped, and his eyes gazed wildly over Hazzard's shoulder.

"It's all up!" he whispered hoarsely. "Here comes a tac."

"A tac?" Hazzard repeated. He had heard no approaching footsteps. But both he and Blair turned to look behind them.

Instantly the big frencher swung from the shoulder, and landed a terrific blow on Hazzard's jaw. Without a sound the cadet captain fell backward, tumbled over the bank, and rolled to the bottom of Fort Clinton Ditch.

The frencher's ruse, and the crushing blow that felled Hazzard, so surprised the plebe sentinel that for a moment he stood helpless, while the other cadet disappeared in the darkness toward the "A" Company tents. Then he recovered his senses, and split the night with his cries.

"The guard, number three! The guard, number three!" he yelled.

As out of the guard tent shot the rudely awakened cadets on sentry duty, Rod Hazzard clambered disconsolately out of the ditch. A thorough search was made for the masked frencher, but he had vanished, leaving not a trace of his identity.

CHAPTER II.

OUT OF THE NIGHT.

THE following day passed without anything unusual occurring. Tattoo, then taps, sounded, and again the cadet camp was silent and asleep. A cadet lieutenant, with his lantern, made the tent-to-tent inspection to see that all were abed. He dropped the flap of Hazzard's tent as he passed.

Hazzard, his mind still on the events of the previous evening, lay between his blankets, but could not sleep. His tentmate, Dion Arrance O'Hare, was breathing deeply from the cot in the corner. For three years, as hazed and harassed plebes, as skylarking yearlings, and "spoonoid" upper classmen, Dion O'Hare and Rod Hazzard had been bunkies together. On the football field and in other sports both were well known in army circles as ramparts of West Point. Yet the two were of widely different types. Hazzard was serious, earnest, and strictly obedient to

orders. O'Hare, on the other hand, was impulsive, and forever up to some mischief. He had well earned the nickname of "Mad" O'Hare. Indeed, had it not been for Rod Hazzard's friendship and serious counsel, O'Hare, despite his natural aptitude for his studies, would have been "hived" from the Point, for he was always in some kind of trouble. But the two friends were so attached to each other that each fought the other's battles even more willingly than his own.

Hazzard had told his chum all about the events of the previous night, including the threats the big upper classman had made. But, although they talked it over and over, and discussed the matter from every angle, they could arrive at no conclusion as to the identity of the mysterious, masked man.

The tower clock in the Academic Building boomed for half past ten o'clock. Hazzard had almost fallen asleep, when he was startled by a whispered call:

"Hazzard! Oh, Hazzard!"

He sat upright in his cot just as some one raised the flap in the rear of his tent. "Who is it?" he demanded.

"Hawkins, a plebe, sir," was the answer, in the formal terms the upper classmen required of plebes.

"Yes? Well, what is it, Hawkins?"

"Blair, the plebe in the tent next to mine, is in trouble. Upper classmen were taking him away, and he slipped me a note. Said for me to get it to you. Here it is, sir."

A folded paper was thrust into Rod's outstretched hand.

"Who were the upper classmen?"

"Couldn't see, sir; it was dark."

"Scratch a match, Hawkins; I want to read this message."

The match flared up, and threw a fitful, ghostly light on the scared face of the plebe, Hawkins, whom Hazzard knew merely by sight. As the trembling hands of the plebe guarded the flame, Hazzard read the message:

Am being taken from tent by first classmen. I wrote this in advance, to have it ready, for I was warned of trouble to-day. I heard that they were going to take me through the lines to the Kosciusko Statue to haze me within an inch of my life.

BLAIR.

"You can go, Hawkins," said Hazzard.

He turned to O'Hare, and grasped him by the shoulder. "O'Hare!" he called, as he shook him awake. Then he quickly told what had occurred. "And now," he finished, "I'm going out to break up this hazing bee."

O'Hare leaped out of his cot. "Sure! We'll ambush and tomahawk and scalp these miserable plebe hazers. I only hope the sneak who slammed you last night is in the bunch."

"He's behind the whole scheme, I'll bet. But you're not coming, Dion; you're not in on this."

"I'd like to know why?"

"You're in trouble enough. You've got demerits a-plenty. If we were to get caught at the sentry lines, or missed from camp, you'd get hived sure. Furthermore, this is my fight. I gave my word I would protect this plebe. I should do it alone. If you insist on going, I'll simply report the hazing to the officer of the day, and——"

"Oh, well, go alone, then, Roddy," interrupted the disappointed O'Hare.

While talking, Hazzard had been rapidly getting into his clothes. Presently he slipped out of their tent, and, like a shadow, passed the tents of "A" Company toward Post No. 3, where the events of the night previous had happened. He was about to french, but in his case it was not merely a risky piece of mischief. Duty and honor demanded that he french across the lines to the Kosciusko Statue, for he had given his word to protect the plebe, Blair.

Near the ice-water tank, where the shadows of overhanging trees were blackest, he crouched on the ground and waited. When the sentinel reached the end of his post, he shot across the line, unseen. Without stopping to look around, he made off rapidly, but silently, and reached the monument without mishap.

To his surprise, he saw no signs of hazers. Not a bush stirred. No black

shadows passed through the bright moonlight hustling a disconsolate figure back and forth. There was only that huge statue with its grotesque shadows stretching out from its base. He sat down on the ground in the darkness and listened. There was not a sound. He was puzzled. Had the hazers come and gone already? Or had they changed their plans and gone elsewhere? Perhaps that note was just a ruse, and——

Suddenly a loud explosion rent the still night air, and rumbled from end to end of the tented plains. Hazzard shot to his feet, and, without even glancing around him, started back to the camp on the run.

CHAPTER III.

BY COURT-MARTIAL.

"THE reveille gun!" cried Hazzard, in consternation. "Who has fired it?" He realized, with a sinking heart, that one of the gravest breaches of discipline had occurred. The reveille gun is fired only at five o'clock each morning, but there it was near eleven o'clock at night.

"This is no place for me," he panted, as he made haste for the lines. "The whole camp will be aroused, and on the lookout for every frencher. Double sentries will be set. The officer of the day will search the tents to see who is missing. I'm in for it now!"

At the line of Post No. 4 he crouched in the shadow of the bushes, and peered around cautiously for the sentry. To be sure, there were two of them, just as he had feared. And, moreover, their air of watchfulness showed plainly that there was unusual excitement in the air. He waited until the sentries were at opposite ends of their beat and farthest from him. Then, on tiptoes, he shot between the two, and dashed into the bushes across the line.

At that moment, just as he was almost safe, the sentries turned and sighted him.

"Halt!"

Hazzard came to an abrupt stop as the two sentries ran up to him.

"What, you, Hazzard?" cried one.

"Why, Pontoons!" said the other ruefully.

Surprise and friendly reproach were in their voices.

"And here comes a tac!"

"Two tacs—and one is the commandant!"

Hazzard paled, but did not speak. Lieutenant Moore and the commandant approached with grave faces.

"You are under arrest, Hazzard," said the white-haired superior sternly. "You have spoiled, by a foolish prank, a noteworthy career at the Point. I cannot understand how you could stoop to such a rash act as to fire off the reveille gun."

Hazzard made no reply, and Lieutenant Moore broke in. "And the dummy figure you left in your bed did not deceive us," he said caustically.

The cadet was dumfounded. He had half expected the charge of firing off the reveille gun, and was ready for it, but what did they mean by a dummy figure in his cot?

Too amazed to speak, he threw Lieutenant Moore a searching glance, but could read nothing in his stolid countenance. As in a dream, he walked away between the two officers. Vaguely he understood that he was under arrest; but so bewildered was he by the unexpected and mysterious turn of events that he hardly realized his disgrace. He remembered the tone of mild reproach in the voices of the sentries who had stopped him. Frenching was not such a serious crime as to call for that. Evidently there had been other and more serious mischief afoot. Some one had fired the reveille gun. The offender had escaped, and Hazzard was believed to be the guilty one; that was clear enough. But that dummy figure in his cot! Who had placed it there, and why?

Gradually it dawned on his confused mind that his enemy, the masked frencher, had struck. There had been no hazing at the Kosciusko Statue. The note was a ruse to lure him across the lines; and while he was absent the dummy figure had been placed in his

cot. Then the reveille gun had been fired to arouse the whole camp and catch him in the trap.

Hazzard went through the rest of the night and the following day in a daze. His mind was still puzzling with the mysterious predicament in which he found himself, when he was called to evening parade. Behind the Academy Building the sun was setting in a glory of light; in front, on the parade ground, was assembled the personnel of the Point in splendid formation.

"Attention to orders!" came the crisp command of Cadet Adjutant O'Neil.

Hazzard's heart thumped. He knew that he was soon to hear what official action had been taken in regard to his arrest and the grave charges against him. He drew himself up to face the ordeal.

The adjutant was reading:

"Headquarters U. S. Military Academy,
WEST POINT, New York.
"Special Orders Number Forty.

"For having absented himself from camp without due authority, and for attempting to force his way across a sentry's post, the commission of Cadet Captain Roderick Hazzard is hereby revoked. He is confined to that portion of the encampment east of the color line, and is ordered to do two tours of extra duty each Wednesday and Saturday afternoon until such time as it is deemed advisable to rescind this sentence. Cadet Hazzard is hereby released from arrest.

"Pursuant to the recommendation of the commandant of cadets, the following appointment in the battalion of cadets is announced to take place immediately:

"To captain, Cadet Buell Guernsey Bucknell, vice Roderick Hazzard, reduced."

Hazzard did not look around; no cadet in ranks is ever guilty of that; but out of the tail of his eye he saw a glow suffuse the face of a stalwart six-footer some distance to the left in the row ahead. It was "Bull" Bucknell, the man who had profited by Hazzard's fall.

As yet nothing had been said about the firing of the reveille gun, or of the dummy figure found in Hazzard's bed. Those were things too grave for the commandant alone to settle. Responsibility and punishment for that could be fixed only by the last resort of the army—court-martial.

Hazzard, therefore, was, in a measure, prepared for the blow when the adjutant announced the court-martial to deal with the more serious elements of his case.

"Poor Pontoons," was the sympathetic murmur that swept through the ranks.

"He doesn't deserve a court."

"He's sure in wrong."

"I think the whole thing is a plot."

"Well, it's not like Hazzard."

These were only a few of the remarks that broke into the stunned brain of the disgraced cadet. Like a sleep-walker, he moved toward his tent.

It was to be a summary court-martial, which meant that it would be held that very evening.

An orderly halted him as he was entering his tent. "Mr. Hazzard, you will appear before the court for arraignment in a half hour. You will wear full dress, gloves, and side arms."

Hazzard acknowledged the order, then lifted the tent flap and went in. He was busying himself with his uniform when O'Hare entered. The latter's grip on his hand showed how deep and sincere was his sympathy.

"It's a blue day, old man," said O'Hare; "but they can't run a cadet of your standing out of West Point without giving him a chance to make good. You've got two or three tacs on the court with you—Bowen, Jerome, and McCabe always were your friends. Brace up, old pal!"

Hazzard thanked his chum for the cheering words. He went over to the locker, and took out the sword scabbard, with the belt and appurtenances. They were all spick and span, shining like new coins. He looked them over carefully, rubbing off with a chamois skin the tiniest particles of dust.

"All O. K.," he said. "Couldn't be any——"

The tent flap was pulled aside, and a cadet looked in. "Hello, Hazzard," he called. "I've got news for you; secret! Come out here."

"Bull Bucknell!" exclaimed O'Hare. "What's he doing here?"

Hazzard shot a knowing look over his shoulder at O'Hare as he ducked

through the flapping canvas doorway. He left his chum sitting on a camp stool, his head cupped in his hands, and his eyes on the floor. His chum's public disgrace and punishment seemed to cut O'Hare deeply.

Buell Guernsey Bucknell was no intimate friend, or even close acquaintance, of Hazard. Some years older than the former cadet captain, he was a hold-over from the class that had been graduated the year before.

"Hazzard," he began, "I hope you will not think that I am too much elated at being raised to a captaincy by your downfall. Believe me, old man, I feel for you."

"Thanks, Bucknell." Hazzard shook the proffered hand. "I know how it is with you exactly."

Hazzard concealed his surprise at this unsual outburst of generous feeling on the part of the big fellow. At the same time he felt that Bucknell had not come for this alone. "What's the secret, Bull?" he asked.

"Just this, Pontoons. I was passing the tents of 'A' Company, and I heard some voices in a tent near the end of the street. That's the first classmen's quarters, you know. I heard one fellow say: 'How are you going to fix him now? Haven't you done enough already?' Some one answered: 'Enough? Why, I'll tell you what I'm going to do now; I'm going to get him in so wrong with that court-martial that he'll be hived from the Point, sure. I'm going to make him appear at the court without any trimmings.'"

Hazzard fell back a step. "What do you mean?" he exclaimed, unable to grasp the full meaning of the mysterious threat.

"Why, can't you see that there is a scheme on foot to steal your side arms? For you to go before the court without side arms would break all precedent. It would arouse the indignation of the court. They'd cite you for contempt. They wouldn't even give you a chance to state your case. Facing a court-martial on grave charges, as you are, you can guess the result—you would be fired from West Point in disgrace."

Rod's face became grave. "Any idea who it was you heard talking?" he asked.

"Not the least. Better go back to your tent, and keep your eyes on your side arms. That's what I advise."

"No need to just now. O'Hare is in the tent. If any one tries to steal into it —well, it would be good night; that's all."

Bucknell scowled. "O'Hare inside?" he repeated. He leaned over. "Do you know, one of those voices sounded like O'Hare's."

Hazzard smiled faintly, but his eyes flashed. "You're badly mistaken; O'Hare is not the man to take part in a sneaking scheme like that."

Bucknell had gone a little too far in hinting at disloyalty on the part of Rod's old friend. Rod thanked him in a cool voice for his warning, then abruptly left him and entered his tent.

O'Hare was still seated with his head in his hands just as he had left him. He did not seem to notice Rod's entrance.

"Dion," said Hazzard, "what are you thinking of?"

"That court-martial."

"That's so. I'll be late if I don't get a move on."

He went over to the locker, and in the gloom felt along the lid. His groping hands found nothing. A cold fear gripped him. His belt and sword had been there when he left just a minute before. Frantically he searched again.

"Dion! Quick! Strike a match! My side arms; I can't find them!"

O'Hare leaped to his feet. A light was struck, and a thorough search made, but the side arms were gone. Mysteriously they had disappeared even while Hazzard was being warned of the plot.

In dismay the two cadets faced each other.

"They've been stolen," said Hazzard huskily.

"It can't be; I was here all the time."

Hazzard did not answer; for a suspicion forced itself on his mind. Instantly he dismissed it as being an injustice to his old chum.

"Rod," said O'Hare finally, "you wear my side arms; no one will know. The thief will have gained nothing by stealing yours. How about it, Rod?"

Hazzard gripped his hand. His conscience smote him for the accusing thought against O'Hare, and he was glad it had been unspoken.

"No, I'll not wear them, Dion; I'll go without. My only excuse will be the truth. I'll tell them of this plot against me. I'll show them that this sneaking theft was a part of it. Perhaps, after all, this outrage, far from proving an injury, may be a help."

With mingled feelings of hope, fear, and uncertainty, Hazzard went out into the company street, and made his way to the Academic Building. The moment of his trial had come.

As he entered the room where the thirteen officers forming the court-martial were seated in full dress at the long table, he noted astonishment and indignation in their eyes. The judge advocate, Captain Blake, jumped to his feet.

"This is unprecedented! It is an insult to the court—to come before a military tribunal without the regulation accouterments! It is contempt of court, sir!"

He turned to the white-mustached president of the court-martial. The latter rose and gazed down at Hazzard. "Mr. Hazzard," he said judicially, "can you explain this unusual conduct on your part, sir?"

Hazzard, red of face, heels held together, little fingers at seams of trousers, chin bravely up, spoke coolly and collectedly: "I came without side arms, sir, because my side arms were stolen from my tent. It was in order to make me appear ridiculous and insulting that the trick was turned."

An audible snort of derision went around the table. But Hazzard went on to explain. The court-martial, despite its amazement and doubt, listened attentively. Hazzard's good record was behind his sincere words. If he did not convince the court of the truth of his story, he at least earned a chance to prove his word. The president rose once again to his feet. "We cannot try Mr. Hazzard now," he said, "nor for many days to come. A shadow of doubt rests on the case. Until that is cleared, all the evidence collected, and good counsel appointed for the accused, we must wait. It will be a general court-martial."

"But how about the charge of contempt of court?" asked the judge advocate.

The president deliberated a moment.

"Not guilty," he said.

The former cadet captain clicked his heels together, saluted, wheeled about, and strode out of the chamber. He had won his first victory. Although reduced to the ranks, he still had a chance to prove himself innocent of the grave charges against him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHALLENGE.

HAZZARD was greatly astonished when he reached his tent to find that O'Hare was not in. Not that it was anything unusual for him to be absent, but he quite naturally thought his chum would be anxious to hear the outcome of the court-martial, and would be waiting in their tent for the news. Taps sounded, and still O'Hare did not return. Wondering what could be keeping his chum away so long, Hazzard rolled into his blankets and soon fell into a fitful sleep.

It was near three o'clock when he was awakened by the sound of voices and the moving about of men in his tent.

"What's up, O'Hare?" he inquired.

"Shut up, Rod!" came in Dick Wayne's gruff tones.

"Go to sleep, old man," said Curtis.

"What! All you fellows here? What's wrong?" exclaimed Hazzard, getting to his feet.

The tent was crowded with the dark figures of cadets. Some one struck a match and lighted a bull's-eye lantern.

"O'Hare! For Heaven's sake, what's the matter with you?" cried Hazzard.

There on his cot, his face torn and bleeding, and one eye swollen and discolored, was Dion O'Hare, stripped to

the waist, and being rubbed down by Wayne.

"You've been fighting, Dion!" said Hazzard, when he had grasped the situation. "Of course, you won?"

"No," said O'Hare slowly, after a moment's hesitation. "No, Rod, I didn't win. I fought Bull Bucknell."

"You fought that big bruiser!"

"Oh, but it was a pretty fight," Wayne remarked. "You should have seen the go, Rod. You know O'Hare for cleverness; well, only Bull's extra weight won for him."

"But what started the fight?"

O'Hare made no answer.

Hazzard's curiosity was aroused. He went over to O'Hare's side, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me! Why so much mystery about this? What was the fight about?"

O'Hare answered unwillingly:

"It's this way, Rod: While you were at the court I heard something, in passing one of the tents, that made me stop. Some one was saying that you were the cadet who stole those missing watches. I looked in. The fellow was Bucknell. I called him down; that's all."

Hazzard did not know what to think. There had been watches, fobs, money, and other valuables missing for some time. It had kept the cadet adjutant busy at evening parades reporting such losses. Rumors were rife of a thief being in the corps.

But to accuse Rodney Hazzard of being the thief was ridiculous. In the face of the splendid reputation he had at the Point, no one would dare accuse him unless the accuser had positive evidence of guilt, or was making a cowardly attempt to blacken his name. He knew that Bucknell did not believe him guilty of the thefts; then why should he try to besmirch his character? Had not Bucknell warned him of the plot to steal his side arms? Was not that a sign of friendship? If Bucknell would do him a good turn like that, why would he then turn around and do him an injury?

"Yet was it a good turn?" Hazzard asked himself. The circumstances were suspicious. Indeed, Rod could not keep his mind from dwelling on the peculiar coincidence that his side arms were stolen while Bucknell was warning him.

But what had he done that Bucknell should hold such a grudge against him? The answer struck him like a blow in the face. Buell Guernsey Bucknell must be the masked frencher—the upper classman who had sworn revenge on him!

Until reveille Hazzard lay on his cot, and pondered the matter. He went back over the strange events since the night he found the masked frencher trying to intimidate the plebe sentinel, Robin Blair. And every trail, every bit of reasoning he could follow out, brought him to the same conclusion.

He soon had further evidence that his reasoning was correct. For that very morning, as he and several companions were passing Bucknell's tent, the plebe, Robin Blair, staggered out of it, pale and gasping.

For a moment Hazzard stared at Blair in silence. Then he walked up to him and put his hands on his shoulders. "Blair, who has been hazing you?" he demanded.

The frightened plebe could not answer. He looked at his questioner with appeal and terror in his eyes.

Hazzard understood. He turned and walked over to Bucknell's tent, jerked open the flap, and strode inside. "Bucknell," he said sternly, "you have been hazing that plebe, Blair, whom I promised to protect. You will——"

"Got any objections?' interrupted Bucknell defiantly.

"Yes," replied Hazzard, in an even voice, "I have; I gave that plebe my word that I would protect him, and I'm going to do it."

"Is that so? That's too bad."

"Yes, too bad for you, Bucknell."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"You'll have to fight."

"You don't dare tackle me, and you know it. I ate up your friend O'Hare last night, and I can do the same with you."

"That's another little matter I have to settle with you, Bucknell. You tried

to start the report that I am a thief. You will answer to me for that!"

"And my answer, Rod Hazzard, is that you *are* a thief—a thief and a coward—a disgrace to the Point. You are merely——"

"That's enough!" cried Hazzard. "I didn't come here to quarrel with you. I came to——"

"To get that handsome face of yours all mussed up!" howled the enraged Bucknell, as he struck Rod a resounding slap on the cheek with the palm of his big hand.

Hazzard reddened, and his eyes flashed ominously. He controlled himself with difficulty.

"Come on!" cried Bucknell, as he squared off.

"No," said Hazzard, his voice husky with anger. "I won't fight here; I'll fight by the cadet code. My seconds will call on you and arrange everything."

With that he turned, and left the enraged Bucknell alone in his tent.

CHAPTER V.

AT FORT CLINTON.

"I AM going to fight Bull Bucknell," said Hazzard, when he joined his companions. "O'Hare, I want you and Curtis to be my seconds. Will you?"

The two cadets pledged their services with a zeal that showed their deep friendship.

"Leave it to us, Roddy," said O'Hare. "We'll attend to everything, and you get rested up."

So it was that, some time after three o'clock the next morning, Hazzard was awakened by Curtis. O'Hare was already up and nearly dressed. Hazzard pulled on his clothes, donning for the occasion an old pair of fatigue trousers, a service shirt of blue, and an old campaign hat. In a few minutes the three cadets left the tent, and passed silently through the company street toward the lines.

The hint of morning hung drear and gray over the tented plain, and the air was chill with a penetrating dampness. Hazzard shoved his hands into his trousers pockets and shivered.

"Wait a minute," whispered O'Hare. "Rod needs a coat. He'll be too cold to be at his best. And after the fight he'll need extra clothing to keep from taking cold."

O'Hare went back to the tent, and soon returned with an old gray service coat of his own which he had worn as a plebe. He threw it over Rod's shoulders, and the three went on.

At the lines, the three cadets huddled together and watched for the plebe sentry to get to the far end of his post. For a tense moment they waited. Then at a husky "Now!" from Hazzard, the gray figures slunk silently and rapidly across the lines beyond sight or hearing of the sentry, and made off for the white ramparts of Fort Clinton.

"Hello, Roddy," exclaimed Cadet Captain Blount, as Hazzard and his seconds entered. "We're waiting for you. Bucknell is already here with his seconds, Spence and Conklin. Cadet Lieutenants McCabe and Barker have agreed to act as timekeepers. I am referee. The ring has been marked off, the lookouts posted, and everything is in readiness. How about you?"

"Ready," said Hazzard, as he threw O'Hare's coat to one side, drew off his shirt, and stepped forward.

Referee Blount raised his hand for attention.

"Time!"

Stripped to their waists, Hazzard and Bucknell stepped to the center of the ring and shook hands—bare hands, for such bouts are not fought with gloves. Bucknell did it grudgingly.

A murmur of admiration burst from the onlookers at the sight of the straight, broad-shouldered athletes who were to match their strength and skill. Wiry, supple muscles playing beneath smooth, white skin spoke eloquently of the sound health and good training of the combatants. Although Bucknell was a trifle the taller and heavier, Hazzard made up for it with his surer eye and superior cleverness. It was a fairly even match, and gave every indication of being a bitterly contested fight.

They backed away after the handshake, and Bucknell came forward with a great bound. They feinted, ducked, swung from the shoulder, and surged back and forth while hard fists beat terrific tattoos on heaving chests that grew red and purple from the blows.

Bucknell's fierce onslaught was too much for Hazzard. Adopting wiser tactics, he sprang away and confined his work to defending himself from the hammering fists.

The move deceived Bucknell. He thought that his opponent had already weakened. He came in more viciously than ever, swinging blow after blow on parrying arms and shoulders. With eyes flashing evilly and lips drawn in a snarl, the huge fellow tried desperately to crush down the other's defense.

Hazzard had all he could do to keep from under the other's sledge-hammer fists. To him Bucknell appeared like a maddened octopus whose myriad arms struck furiously and rapidly from everywhere at once.

Growing more confident each second, Bucknell presently dropped all defense, and made a vicious lunge at Rod's jaw. Rod side-stepped, and sent in a quick jab with his right that caught Bucknell squarely in the neck. The giant reeled back dizzily. He recovered quickly, but came in more cautiously just as the round closed.

The second round opened with Bucknell again determined to break down Rod's defense, and beat him by sheer force of his greater weight and strength. Hazzard, cool and cautious, kept up his defense, and watched closely for an opportunity to land on his antagonist. Bucknell rushed in. Blow after blow he hailed at his enemy's body and face; yet he fought more cautiously than in the first round, for he didn't care to let the other repeat his wicked jab on the neck.

Hazzard's footwork was marvelous. With a steady eye he watched Bucknell's advances, and neatly dodged or parried them with his arms. Occasionally he landed a blow on Bucknell's chest, but without sufficient force to make it count.

Suddenly, after one of these light chest blows, Bucknell staggered back and dropped his arms. Hazzard, deceived by the ruse, sprang forward. Like a flash Bucknell ducked, and, with both fists at once, struck him a crushing blow over the heart. Hazzard reeled back with an involuntary cry of pain. Eager to press his advantage, Bucknell followed, and tried to land a knock-out. But, although Hazzard was groggy for a few seconds, he cleverly parried Bucknell's blows, and soon brought him up short with a stinging uppercut.

Bucknell, enraged, now tore in with reckless desperation. No other man at the Point could have withstood the terrible punishment the maddened fellow inflicted on Hazzard. At each blow the onlookers expected to see the lighter man go down.

Still crowding, Bucknell swung a terrific blow at Hazzard's head. Rod ducked, and Bucknell's fist tore through empty air. For a second he lost his balance. Rod leaped forward. With smashing force, he landed squarely on Bucknell's jaw. Like a felled ox, the giant crashed to the ground, and in a few seconds the referee was holding up Rod's hand and proclaiming him the victor.

"Roddy, old pal, you've won!" exclaimed O'Hare joyously.

"No wonder," chimed in Curtis. "He hopped around like a man on a red-hot stove."

"That's right!" chuckled O'Hare. "We couldn't see you half the time. No wonder Bucknell couldn't find you."

On the other side of the ring, Spence and Conklin, much crestfallen, were throwing water into Bucknell's face to revive him. After a moment he sat up and looked around hazily. When he caught sight of Hazzard sitting unconcernedly among the other cadets, he glared at him malevolently.

"Makes a face as if he had just taken a dose of quinine," remarked Curtis.

"And I'll bet his head is ringing as if he had taken a barrel of it," added O'Hare, with a grin.

"Don't talk so loud, fellows," warned Cadet Lieutenant Blount.

"That's right," added Hazzard. "Let's not spoil a good night's work by bringing the tacs down after us. They think there has been too much fighting lately, and they are on the lookout. We'll rest a minute and then—— Hey, Bucknell, that's my coat you have!"

"Excuse me," said Bucknell, as he threw down the coat and picked up his own, which lay near. "Thought it was mine."

Hazzard started to get the coat, but O'Hare stopped him. "I'll get it for you," he said. "You sit still and——"

Just at that moment, hoarse cries of alarm from the lookouts rang through the fort, and brought every cadet to his feet with a start.

CHAPTER VI.

DARKENING CLOUDS.

WITH warning cries, the lookouts came bounding in from their posts to the group of startled cadets. Then they all scattered and made for the lines. At top speed they ran, for at any moment the tacs might sound the alarm and the sentries would be warned of their approach. Each cadet looked out for himself, because, in case of an alarm, it would be practically impossible for them to cross the lines in a group as they had done an hour or so before.

But the goddess of good fortune smiled on the fleeing cadets. Every one of them crossed the lines, and reached his tent in safety. O'Hare was sitting on his cot when Hazzard burst in, red-faced and panting.

"Spike my guns if that wasn't a scare!" puffed Hazzard, as he threw himself onto his cot, exhausted. "I'm going to get a few minutes' rest before reveille."

"Good idea," assented O'Hare, stretching out on his blankets.

In a minute the tired Hazzard was in a sound sleep. O'Hare was thinking of the fight. "Bet old Bucknell's head feels as though he'd been kicked by eight army mules all at once," he chuckled, as he rolled over and fell asleep.

Late in the afternoon of that day, as the two tentmates were idling away a few minutes after the day's hard drilling, O'Hare suddenly turned and asked:

"Say, Roddy, what did you do with the coat I loaned you for the fight?"

"By Jove! Bet it was left at Fort Clinton. Remember, you were just going to get it for me when the lookouts shouted that the tacs were coming. In the excitement I ran off and forgot the coat."

"Wonder if the tacs found it?"

"If they did, we can expect to hear from them before long. They'll send an orderly to——"

Hazzard's speech was suddenly interrupted by a cadet who abruptly entered the tent. He saluted, then turned to Rod. "Mr. Hazzard, I am instructed to order you to appear before the cadet court of honor. You will go alone, and you will go at once."

The cadet again saluted, wheeled, and left the tent as abruptly as he had entered. Rod and O'Hare stared at each other in amazement. "The cadet court of honor!" they exclaimed, in unison.

"Maybe you're wanted as a witness," suggested O'Hare.

"A witness? I have witnessed nothing. What can this mean?"

"When that fellow shot into the tent I thought sure it was an orderly coming to call us before the commandant for last night's fracas."

"Wish it was," said Hazzard gloomily. "I'd rather face him than the cadet court of honor."

"You're right on that," agreed O'Hare.

"And the cadets wouldn't call a court without good grounds."

"No; only some outrage against the cadet code brings them together. Then, as you know, the upper classes each name a committee which makes up the court, and calls the accused before it for trial."

"Yes, and he gets a fair trial."

"And the punishment——"

"The punishment," finished Rod slowly, "is—is Coventry!"

A painful silence followed the mention of this word. Then Rod left the tent.

With his mind filled with vague fears because of the strange summons before the court, Rod passed down the company street, and, at the other end, entered a tent where were seated in perfect silence a grim and judicial group of cadets. At his entrance, Cadet Captain Blount arose.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the accused is before us. The trial will immediately proceed. Mr. Hazzard, is this your coat?"

Before him, on the table, lay a service coat which Hazzard at once recognized as the one he had left in Fort Clinton.

"Yes; it is the one I wore last night; but——"

"Answer the court without comment," interrupted Blount sternly. "Mr. Hazzard, please explain how you came to be carrying around in the pockets of your coat a large quantity of jewelry that belongs to other cadets?"

"Why, what do you mean?" gasped Hazzard.

For answer, Blount emptied the coat pockets. Watches, cuff buttons, and other pieces of jewelry fell onto the table in a glittering heap of gold.

Hazzard was speechless with astonishment. He passed his hand across his brow as if to make sure that his eyes were not deceiving him. His silence was evidently misinterpreted as a sign of guilt.

"Gentlemen," said Blount, "we may sum up the case before us as follows: This morning, Cadet Roderick Hazzard, while at Fort Clinton, became frightened at the approach of tactical officers, and ran away without taking his coat. Cadet Lieutenants McCabe and Barker noticed the coat, and, fearing that the tacs might find it, Lieutenant Barker caught it up and took it with him to camp. On his way he fell over a tent rope, and two watches were thrown from the coat. One of these watches he recognized as his own, which was stolen several days ago. He notified Lieutenant McCabe, and together they searched the coat and found the evidence we see before us. Each of these pieces of jewelry has been stolen within the past week. Unless Mr. Hazzard can explain to the satisfaction of the court how this jewelry comes to be in his possession, the court must consider, on the evidence presented, that he is the thief. Mr. Hazzard, we are ready for your explanation."

Hazzard did not answer. In the midst of Blount's speech, the accused cadet saw new complications before him. The coat was not his, he remembered; it was O'Hare's. O'Hare was the one to explain the presence of all that jewelry. But could he do it?

Grave fears and misgivings raced through his mind at the thought of his chum, O'Hare, being branded a thief under such incriminating circumstances. Hazzard had not examined the coat when it was given to him by O'Hare. For all he knew, the jewelry may have been in the pockets when it was thrown over his shoulders.

In his heart Hazzard could not bring himself to believe that O'Hare was the thief. But he could not keep away the ugly thought that this was the second time his chum had been placed in a bad light.

"We're waiting," reminded Blount.

"Well," said Hazzard helplessly, "I—why, I——"

"Come—your answer!" insisted Blount.

Hazzard straightened and stood at attention. The canvas courtroom was hushed. The cadets leaned forward to catch every word the accused, face pale and lips quivering, answered in a quiet voice:

"I have nothing to say."

For a moment the courtroom was silent. Most of the cadets believed he was innocent, and thought he could easily explain the suspicious circumstances. His admission of guilt came as a great blow to them.

Then Blount broke the painful silence; but to Hazzard's dazed mind his voice seemed to come from afar off.

Like the tolling of a distant knell, he heard the words "guilty," and "Coventry." Then, like a man condemned to die, he passed out of the tent.

He had gone only a few steps when a hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned, and Blount addressed him:

"Rod, this is terrible. You have always been held in high esteem at the Point. You have been known as a model officer, a true-blue chum, and a hero of the army football games. And now comes this dreadful disgrace—branded as a—a thief! I've come to you as an old friend to advise you in this hour of the greatest trouble that can befall a cadet. You have been sentenced to Coventry; you know what that means. Prison walls are as nothing compared with the wall of solitude that will now be thrown around you. Old friends must now pass you by without speaking. No one may call you by name. Indeed, no one will speak to you at all except on official business; then it will always be a cold 'Mr. Hazzard.' You will be snubbed and ostracized until your spirit breaks and you go home. After what you have been at the Point, you can never bear the great humiliation of being spurned as a thief by every cadet. So I have come to advise you to leave the Point to-night."

"Thank you, Blount," said Hazzard, his voice husky with emotion. "I appreciate your kindness, and I will think over what you say."

Like wildfire the news of Rod Hazzard's downfall spread through the camp. With grave faces the cadets gathered in groups in the company streets, and discussed the trial and the court's sentence. Hazzard had many friends. Some believed him innocent; some believed the sentence too harsh. Hazzard—the hero of West Point—sent to Coventry! It was unbelievable. But as long as the cadet court of honor decreed it, no cadet, not even O'Hare, would dare to balk its sentence.

In his heart Hazzard knew he had done no wrong, and that thought helped him to endure. He felt that he could keep up at least until Dion, for whom he suffered this disgrace, had been graduated. After that—well, he did not care to think further.

CHAPTER VII.

IN COVENTRY.

IN his bitter loneliness, Hazzard came to live with but one ambition. That was to distinguish himself more than ever in football. He remembered, with great relief, that the coach was a tactical officer who knew nothing, and cared less, about Coventry among the cadets. If he made good on the team, as he had done for three years, that was all the coach cared about.

So it was that when the call for football material went out, Hazzard, quiet and determined, appeared on the field in the old, battered football suit that he had worn in many an hour of victory and glory. One hundred and ten cadets turned out for the initial test. As the coach, "Foghorn" Grimes, expressed it, he had the "largest squad of beef ever in togs at the Point." Right at the jump it could be seen that the squad material was a promising lot.

Then began the merciless practice work to select the team for the season's games. This always took place at dusk; for, at West Point, the football players are not exempted from any study or drill, and the only time they have for practice is at twilight.

Day after day the squad came out to be beaten and hammered into shape by the coaches. Steadily the ruck of the squad was whipped out from the few clean players, and sent back in black disappointment to the side lines and next season's ambitions. Then, with the picked men working more smoothly each day, the work went on until the fittest of the fit had been found, and the season's games were ushered in.

In the practice games and in the strenuous contests with visiting teams, Hazzard played as if it was all he lived for.

"Roddy, old man, you always have been a crack player," said Grimes one day, "but this season you are a regular demon!"

Hazzard tore through the lines like

a wild horse through a field of reeds. Grim-faced, eagle-eyed, he played with the desperation of a madman. No one could stop him. There was but one player who even remotely approached him in the work; that was big Bull Bucknell.

Of course, the goal of the whole season's playing was the big game with the team from the Annapolis naval academy, the supreme contest between the government's two great schools. This was to be held at Philadelphia on November 30th. To be kept out of the Army-Navy game is the bitterest disappointment of the season. For the supreme honor of playing in this game, every man of the West Point players strove with desperation during the entire season. And as the season progressed the rivalry between Hazzard and Bucknell for the position of full back at the big game grew keener and more bitter each day. For three years Bucknell had coveted the honor; for three years he had gone into the season's work with a grim determination to play in the Army-Navy game. But always, Hazzard, by his faster and cleverer work, had beaten him, and Bucknell had stifled his hurt pride and black despair. This season was to be his last at West Point. It was his last chance. He tried for the honor with all the ferocity of his nature.

Yet this year, just as in the seasons before, when the team was finally put on the train for Philadelphia, the coach's verdict was that Hazzard was to play full back, with Bucknell held out for reserve in case of an emergency.

One incident of importance occurred on the merry train ride. Hazzard was almost hidden behind a newspaper he was reading when a group of second-string substitutes crowded into the seats ahead of him, and began talking of the coming ordeal on the gridiron.

"If I can only get in ten minutes of play before the last whistle," said one earnestly, "I'll show them. I'll show them!"

"Show them what, Bucknell?"

"I'll show them I'm a better full back than Hazzard, and have been for three years. They never gave me a chance. Favoritism—that's what! But my chance is coming, for I'm going to get into this game. It's my last game, and I'm going to get in and show them who's who if I have to—— Well, I'm going to get into that game at any cost!"

Bucknell's words seemed to have a strange, sinister meaning behind them. Hazzard thought them over and over, and an uncomfortable feeling came over him as the train rumbled into the station at Philadelphia.

TO BE CONTINUED.

The November mid-month TOP-NOTCH, out October 15th, will contain the next section of this serial. As this magazine is issued twice a month, the reader does not have time to forget the details of the story, as he might if he had a month to wait.

Importance of More Battleships

"DO you think," asked an old-fashioned woman the other day, "that we ought to have two more battleships?"

"I do, most emphatically," replied the fair young lady. "I was at Newport for three weeks last year, and there were not half enough battleships there to furnish young officers for the women who wanted to dance."

Hard to Dodge

"OF course," said the optimist, "if a man gets into the habit of hunting trouble he's sure to find it."

"Yes," replied the pessimist; "and if he's so lazy that he always tries to avoid it, it will find him. So what's the difference?"

Dexter's Try-Out

By C. T. Jordan

THIS hot, oppressive August week meant a great deal to Dexter; it spelled success or failure. If he made good forty solid weeks of work loomed ahead. If he didn't "get over" his act—well, maybe he could fall back on his shorthand; maybe he couldn't.

It was Friday night, and the outlook was not very promising. True, he had not been hooted yet; neither had he received a single curtain call. The Temple Circuit manager had dropped in at the matinée, but had given Dexter no encouragement. He had said he would come again in the evening, and see how the house received the act.

"Magicians aren't such drawing cards nowadays," had been his parting remark.

The technique of Dexter's work was far more perfect than that of many successful men in the conjuring profession; what showed up poorly in the act was his delivery. He was letter perfect in his lines, but somehow he lacked the ability to get them over the footlights with sufficient effect. One thing was missing in his make-up—a graceful stage presence—personality.

He would know Hayward's verdict inside an hour; then the disheartening suspense would be over. He would do his best, and if his best were not good enough——

Dexter's call came. He swallowed a drink of water, cleared his throat, and made his way to the wings. Two minutes more and he must appear. He told himself he had a particularly hard turn to follow—Dozier and Stall, quick-fire Hibernian parodists—but then, his stage setting would partly offset the hilarious mood they had created. Dexter was not a funny man, and he knew it. Possibly that was the reason he could not send his made-to-order witty words across. He bit his lip enviously as he counted the dialogue team's encores. Six! And so far he had been unable to earn one.

AFTER seeming ages the audience permitted the Irish jesters to go their way, and the grotesque drop was raised. Dexter came forth, and, nervously turning back his cuffs, faced the spectators and scanned the front-row faces.

There was Hayward, true to his word; and two seats to his right sat Flora Evers, the young woman who had attracted so much of Dexter's attention in the old law office. This was the first time she had come to see him perform. She smiled up at him, and her smile put new life into his slender, straight body.

He resolved, at that smile, to get his talk over this time, and a surprisingly strange calm settled upon him. He would try talking directly to her; he would ignore the others who watched him with skeptical expressions.

His first trick, a pleasing little conceit with a handkerchief, went as it had never gone before. A satisfying little ripple of enjoyment swept the theater, and in it Dexter took fresh encouragement. Shifting his eyes from the girl only when it was necessary to watch his own hands, he proceeded.

Illusion followed illusion, each blending with its predecessor so that no break marred the performance. Dexter knew without looking that the spectators were following him closely, with breathless interest, and gradually he became so absorbed in his work that he forgot his resolve to watch only Miss Evers.

He allowed his glance to sweep the entire gathering, from orchestra to gallery. All eyes were on him, watching his every movement, and on the tiers of faces there was no indifference, only pleased bewilderment. Hayward, too, was no exception, and Dexter could imagine how quickly the manager would

take back all he had said. He was making good!

HOW differently this performance was running! Dexter turned to take an egg from his assistant's hand, and his glance went on past the assistant—to the wings, where the other performers and even the usually immovable stage hands stood, all glorying in his success.

He immediately faced the audience again, for he dared not lose the grip he held; but in his wingward glance he had observed something more than the gathered stage folk. He had seen beyond them, and what had met his gaze demanded cool, prompt action. Doubtless they knew by now, for he heard a sudden buzzing of suppressed excitement among them.

He could hear a stage whisper from their direction, but he did not heed it; he would finish his illusion first, and he must not hurry unduly. Above all, he must remain calm; the spectators must not suspect what he knew, else——

The whispers from the wings were growing more frantic. The illusion terminated, Dexter leisurely turned toward the stage manager.

"Lower the front drop," he commanded in a low voice, and, picking up from one of his stands a pack of cards, he walked forward to the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, in soothingly modulated tones, "for my final experiment I shall rely solely upon the dexterity of my hands." He stepped upon the runway. "I shall not even utilize the surroundings of the stage in my efforts to bewilder you. I shall continue my performance in the street outside. Do not be startled; the attendants will hand you return checks as you pass through the doors. The gallery first, please. Plenty of time, no need to crowd. A two-step, please, Mr. Conductor."

In three minutes the gallery was vacated, and the rear half of the orchestra section was on its feet. Then the front half rose, still under this master's spell. Dexter smiled upon Miss Evers, and again upon Hayward as they turned to go up the aisle.

The minute every back was turned Dexter whispered the truth to the orchestra conductor, and bade him keep the musicians playing, if for only a few more strains.

IT was growing hot where Dexter stood now, and he could see the belching flames eating their way into the balcony from the side wall.

"Out now while there's time," he said to the conductor, and the music ceased. The men scrambled from their fenced-in coop, and hurried out of the danger with their precious instruments. Dexter followed them.

A crash from behind told him of something attached to the stage caving in, but he was halfway up the aisle now. Would he reach the exit before it was too late? A burst of applause greeted him as he emerged from the smoky lobby, just a second before the deafening roar of some falling upper structure of the stage.

"Did they get out all right behind?" was his first question, put to Dobbs, the house manager.

"Every one of them. But your paraphernalia went up like——"

"What if it did?" spoke a deep voice, and Dexter knew that Hayward had joined them. "If he'd thought of saving his outfit where do you think the houseful would be by now? One little word, or one false move, and there'd have been a panic sure. Mr. Dexter, allow me to congratulate you."

Dexter put forth a trembling hand. He wasn't so brave, now that it was all over with. "Will the loss of my apparatus make me lose the booking you offered me if I made good?" he asked of Hayward.

"In a way, yes, young man." Dexter's eyes fell. "In a way, I take it, that will be to your liking. You can't have the booking I promised; you can have better booking—over a circuit where they don't give a fig for drapery. Over a circuit where personality counts, and is paid for."

And when Dexter looked up he found that he was gazing into the smiling, friendly eyes of Miss Evers, standing near.

Their Bond of Might

By Newton Fuessle and George Saint-Amour

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

HEROIC INITIATION.

"SLIM" was a rugged, splendidly built giant of the stokehole. He threw open the door of his fire box, lunged forward as if about to dive—headforemost into the roaring furnace, seized a fifty-pound slice bar, manipulated it as easily as if it had been a golf club, and soon the clinkers in the hungry fires before him were smashed into little pieces.

"Water!" he yelled, as he turned and grabbed a rake. The command was directed at "Buck," the greenhorn.

Two doors astern stood an experienced coal trimmer. The latter dumped a pail of water on the ashes, cinders, and clinkers almost the instant his fireman had drawn the fire from under his huge marine boiler. But Buck, greenhorn that he was, waited for Slim to bend over the hot, sizzling mass once more. Then, trying clumsily to emulate the action of the other trimmer, he threw his own pail of water. The descending liquid lashed the embers into a savage hiss, while steam and ashes rose in a blinding cloud, scalding Slim's arms and hairy chest.

Imprecations, too thick for distinct utterance, fought for liberation in the enraged stoker's throat. He dropped his rake and hurled himself at the offender; a man has no earthly business in the stokehole of a Great Lakes freighter if he cannot fight.

The furious stoker landed like a lump of granite, but Buck, the young offender, side-stepping swiftly, avoided the attack. He flew at the stoker with a stiff right to the point of the jaw, which sent the bigger man reeling. The blow brought Slim to his senses and roused him to caution.

A murmur of approbation for Buck's prowess rose to the lips of the men in the stokehole, and the four firemen and four coal passers on watch in the hot hole of the *Elderdown* crowded in tense and eager silence around the two combatants, who were now sparring as earnestly, if not as skillfully, as professionals.

"If I once get my hands on ye!" panted Slim.

"You won't!" jeered Buck, his skillful footwork carrying him this way and that as his big foe strove to engage.

"Ye're a prize fighter, are ye!" gasped Slim, after he had struck and missed again.

"Prize fighter nothing!" muttered Buck from behind his splendid guard. "Telegraph operator," he added.

Once more Slim shot out a vicious right, directed at the other's head. Had it landed it might have killed the trimmer, but again Buck parried beautifully. Then, suddenly, his guard dissolved into a swift, hard, flying blow, and Slim went down like an ox, his head banging the steel floor of the stokehole.

Panting for further action, Buck sprang back with agility, eying his enemy through narrowed lids, waiting for Slim to regain his feet. But Slim merely raised himself on his elbow, to gaze with unconcealed admiration at his conqueror, evincing no intention of rising and resuming the battle.

"Say, kid," he gasped, "when a feller forty pounds lighter'n me can knock me down like that, I stays down, see? I ain't licked—nothin' like that. But I'm kinder 'shamed; it's a joke on me, that's all."

Buck took a step forward, grasped both of Slim's big, calloused hands, and helped the stoker to his feet. A moment later the stokehole crew was back at work once more, sweating at its toil in the terrific heat which prevails in the bottom of the big iron-ore freighter. As they labored, many a glance of genuine admiration was directed at Buck, the greenhorn, who had conquered the mighty Slim. During the brief engagement, Buck had earned the respect of the coal watch to a man. Physical force, and only physical force, "goes" in the bottom of a Great Lakes boat. And Buck had amply demonstrated that he knew how to use his body, and that fear had no place in his soul.

When a telegraph operator is found holding down a job side by side with the black-faced titans of the stokehole, there is generally a story to be unraveled. It is in itself a dramatic circumstance for a man whose business is to thump the telegraph key to enter the totally different environment of the bottom of a freighter on the lakes, with all its hazards and its frightful labor.

Back of Buck's voluntary change of occupation lay his love for an auburn-haired, limpid-eyed girl, a waitress in a Cleveland restaurant. Winding back out of the stern environs of the stokehole, there was a thread of golden romance. Less than a fortnight before Buck's battle with Slim, had come the day set for the marriage of the telegraph operator and the waitress. The day before that day Buck, in an hour of weakness, had entered a tavern with one of his cronies and taken a few drinks.

That evening, the girl, smelling liquor on Buck's breath, and frightened by the significance of the fact, took him severely to task. A quarrel had ensued; the world-old conflict of woman fighting for control of the man she loves. Both too immature for wisdom, too feeble in their efforts to bridge the gulf which suddenly had opened up between them, their paths had diverged. The girl went back to her work in the restaurant, heartbroken and bitterly hurt.

At length had come Buck's awakening. The crushing blow of consciousness of what he had done fell mercilessly. With the resurgent courage of youth, he determined to redeem himself by dint of radical change of environment amid the slavish tasks of the stokehole.

CHAPTER II.

LOOKING BACKWARD.

TWO days after his fight with Slim, Buck dropped wearily on a coil of rope at the stern end of the upper deck. He juggled a cigarette into shape, and began puffing reflectively. His back, legs, arms, and hands ached dully. This stokehole job involved the most severe labor he had ever undertaken. And how the *Elderdown* ate coal! She was a gourmand, that freighter! She had the reputation among lake men of burning more coal and being hotter than any other boat owned by the company, not even excluding the turtlebacks, whose stokeholes are supposed to be an earthly Hades. Already the coal passers had been forced to use the heavy iron barrows, which weigh about five hundred pounds each, empty. Buck's hands were raw, lacerated, mangled, and shot with terrible pains.

If his hands and body were racked by

physical torment, however, this was not to be compared with the woes of spirit, the weariness and pain of soul which harassed him, as he sat on the coil of rope that evening, gazing out over the lake which the steamer was traversing. There was a cold and dismal something that April evening about the water. Gleaming like the polished surface of the sheet of steel it resembled, it did not hold the relief which the sapphire and flashing emerald of later months would afford. Even the red of the setting sun, which smote the water near its horizon line, offered not much relief to the cold scene.

Later, during the soft summer months, the freighter's decks were destined to ring with the laughter and soft feminine voices of the company's guests, housed in luxurious comfort in the pleasant staterooms forward, and mingling sometimes with the hard-worked crew as they explored the twilight realms of the enormous craft. But now the *Elderdown* was plowing through the dreary leagues of her journey after ore, an austere and cold-hearted taskmistress, forbidding and dour.

Buck's eyes held signs of dreaming and yearning. His thoughts had traveled back to Cleveland, to dwell there with inexpressible longing. As he mused on, his heart grew sicker and more pain-racked than his body. Memories thronged his brain. Regrets assailed his forlorn soul. If only he could have gone back and lived over again the fortnight that was past!

"Hello, Buck!"

Buck turned quickly. The speaker was Slim. Buck moved over, making room on the coil of rope for the big stoker.

"Glum?" inquired Slim, not unkindly.

"Feeling a little rotten, Slim," responded Buck.

"Yer muscles is bound to get sore on yer first trip in the stokehole," said the big fellow, who understood melancholy from physical sources only.

"I suppose so," murmured Buck idly.

Slim filled his pipe, lighted it, then went on:

"Yer see, w'en I pulls out the fire, I yells 'Water!' an' that's the signal fer you to t'row on yer pailful. I'll be standin' straight up an' won't get burnt. If it ain't done just right, I gets burnt."

"I was mighty sorry about that, Slim," said Buck seriously.

"Aw, that's all right, son. So yer a telegraph operator?" he continued.

"Yes, I've been a railroad operator for six years—off and on," answered Buck.

"Thought that was a high-collar job," observed Slim.

"Perhaps it is. But a high-collar guy can work, you know."

"So I take notice," agreed Slim. "At that, yer up agin' a tough bet down in the hole, Buckie. I won't mind wheelin' a load o' coal fer ye oncet in a while. I likes to try my hand at it," he explained, lest the other might misunderstand his motive. "W'en you gets to be a fireman, you'll help your man, too."

The *Elderdown* was on a long run, bound from Cleveland for the north end of Lake Superior, and Slim had perceived in no time that his trimmer, although he could fight, would not be able to stand the terrific labor in the hot hole.

"What in the devil possessed ye to try this game?" he demanded, after a silence.

Buck moved uneasily on his coil of rope. He raised his grave, gray eyes after a moment, and looked hard at the stoker. "I'll tell you, Slim," he replied then; "it's booze."

"Hum!" ejaculated Slim. "Yer in a bad bunch to cure the booze habit. Why, when we gets in Cleveland, and gets paid off, we jest blow every cent we got. Then we ships again. This here is s'posed to be my summer vacation. Vacation! Winters I'm up in the lumber camps. W'en I come out o' the woods, I pull off the big spree, an' I got to work in the stokehole fer the rest o' the summer. See?"

"Nothing like that for mine when we get back to Cleveland," said Buck seriously, the far-away look coming back into his eyes. "I'm going to get a job back on the railroad, operating a key, where I belong."

CHAPTER III.

STERN FRIENDSHIP.

WHEN Buck opened his eyes next morning, he was nervous and shaky—more so than he had been on either of the two preceding nights of the trip. Slim did not note the dejection of his partner until he was fully dressed, but when he had pulled his heavy sweater over his head, he saw that Buck had made no move in preparation for mess and for work.

"What's the matter, kid?" he demanded.

"Nerves," said Buck.

Slim pulled on his high, bell-tongued shoes, laced them carefully, explaining to Buck that he had once been scalded when a flue burst and flooded the place with six inches of boiling water before he could reach the ladder. "Come on," he added. "Let's eat."

At the breakfast table, Slim consumed a piece of beef as big as one of his own fists, huge quantities of bread and potatoes, and three cups of coffee. Buck, meanwhile, drank only a cup of coffee despite the other's protestations that he must "eat hearty." Then they climbed down the long iron ladder, so hot that its rungs burned Buck's uncalloused hands as he descended. That day Slim did his own work, and most of Buck's as well, refusing to heed the latter's declaration that he could do his trick by himself. For Slim had been quick to see that Buck was utterly unable to handle the heavy barrows heaped with coal while the *Elderdown* was rolling.

"H-a," he growled presently, "you do my work and I'll do yourn. You kin sift coal as well as I kin, an' it won't be so hard on ye."

Thus it continued for several days, Slim watching carefully over the younger man at his side, and insisting on doing most of his work for him. This feeling of comradeship toward the former telegraph operator afforded the rough, uncouth stoker a new emotion. Never had this fighting, hard-drinking, roving lumberjack and stoker felt his heart warmed by the touch of friendship equal to this. Unused to the ways of friendship, he felt embarrassed when he realized that the rest of the toilers down in the stokehole perceived the assistance he was rendering his helper. But he kept on, and before Two Brother Islands were reached, the two workmen furnished an exhibition of comradeship such as the hot hole of the *Elderdown* had never witnessed before.

On the Great Lakes, the lesser lights of the stokehole are called upon in port to do the work of deck hands. One day Buck tried to throw a line to a burly water tender, standing on a narrow stringpiece ashore. But the line, woefully misdirected, twined itself around the man's feet and tripped him into the water twenty feet below. Buck laughed for the first time since leaving Cleveland, for the spectacle was certainly amusing; and five minutes later the dockman undertook to thrash him. Slim was on hand, and insisted upon the privilege of "beating up" the fellow, a task which was speedily accomplished.

Other duties belonging to the deck hands Buck was subsequently assigned to, but failure seemed to be following him like a hound. Once he tried to handle a heavy line which was being wound around the steam capstan as the big boat was warped into her dock under an overhanging iron-ore bin. But he was caught in the big curving, twisting rope, and was hurled headlong on the iron deck. Had he been less agile, he might have been killed. Many a man has been maimed or killed when caught by the big rope as it draws taut around a swiftly revolving capstan. Yet there was no censure for Buck. He tried so hard to do the tasks to which he was assigned, and had such a stanch and never-failing defender in Slim, that all the crew, above and below decks, respected him.

At last the *Elderdown* bumped the timbers of the dock at her destination. Slim edged close to Buck's side, and said in tones low enough not to be overheard: "You can jump now, Buddie. W'en we makes fast, any man's got the right to quit and beat it; Amer-

ican marine law, ye know." But as Slim spoke, the words came hard. A lump rose in his throat. What if Buck should take his advice? What if this strange new comradeship should end right there abruptly, and Buck should depart, perhaps never to be seen again?

"Thanks, Slim, for the tip," said Buck; "but I'm going to stick, old man."

"You're all right, Buck," answered Slim, with a hearty imprecation to conceal his emotion. "I was goin' to say," he added, "that if you jumped here an' was short o' the green stuff, I could slip ye a handful."

"Slim," answered Buck, with a tremor in his voice, "you're the whitest man I ever knew. It's back to Cleveland for mine; I'm going to give myself the big try-out." He paused. Memories were flocking into his brain again—memories of past transgressions, and yearnings that filled his blue eyes with moisture.

In a few minutes Buck was at work with two hatch stakes. Every time he pushed them through the rings of a heavy hatch cover, the bones in his back and shoulders seemed on the point of snapping. Soon Slim was at his side. He took the short, thick sticks away from the novice.

"Look here," said Slim, "I wants to try this just fer fun. It'll do me good; I needs exercise."

CHAPTER IV.

HOME AGAIN.

TWO days and two nights sufficed to load the big iron-ore carrier, and during the forty-eight hours Buck slept not a wink. He was on duty practically all the time, for the *Elderdown* had to be shifted from chute to chute, as she filled here and listed there. Also, the strongest sedatives in the steward's box failed to push Buck over the brink of sleep. The incessant rumble of the red ore, rushing down the long iron chutes, had got on Buck's nerves. Crouched over the telegraph key during the years he had followed that difficult game, Buck's nerves had been assailed for long, weary hours at a stretch; but now they cried aloud against the stern ordeal that confronted him as the slow hours lagged past. Even the dignified skipper noted the plight he was in, and, at a bold suggestion from Slim, offered Buck some of his whisky.

"Thanks, skipper," said Buck, "but there's nothing doing; I'm here on account of that stuff, and now I'm on the wagon for keeps."

"All right," said the captain good-naturedly, for him. "Stick it out the best you can, and when we get back to Cleveland we'll see what can be done for you."

"Done for me?" repeated Buck, surprised.

"Yes—hospital, or something like that," returned the captain.

"Hospital nothing!" said Buck respectfully. "Cleveland, Cleveland," he kept murmuring to himself as he turned on his heel and walked away.

Now came the slapping down of hatches. The great quantity of ashes which had accumulated in the stokehole during the pause at Two Brother Islands had to be discharged, and Buck sweltered at the work. During the ash-shoveling process, Slim relieved him once or twice. Slim worked at the number five scoop like a donkey engine, and Buck, watching him admiringly, wondered how he had ever managed to knock the giant off his feet. The next day it began to snow, and the shivering Buck's gratitude blurred his eyes with tears when Slim gave him his best and heaviest sweater to wear on deck.

One evening, when the *Elderdown* was two days out of Cleveland, the two men sat on deck together on the warm, leeward side of the smokestack. Slim had been moody and depressed during most of the return trip. For one thing, Buck was in better physical shape than he had been on the way north; consequently there had been less occasion for Slim to do him kindnesses. Unable, somehow, to understand what magnetic something Cleveland held which made Buck so anxious to get back there, Slim's soul had become crowded with misgivings, vague suspicions, indefinite fears. In his stammering manner, he

had repeatedly sought to draw Buck out, but never had he succeeded. At length he had given up in despair, and subsided into moody silence.

"Buck," he said, as he sat there beside the smokestack, "have ye got a girl in Cleveland?"

Buck started. Then he smiled a little, and answered: "You guessed it, Slim. What makes you ask?"

"I had a hunch, that's all," said Slim gloomily. "Well," he added a second later, "I guess you an' me won't be side kickers no longer w'en we bumps the dock, eh?" He waited anxiously for Buck's reply.

"I'd like to know why not, Slim? I'm going to take you up to see the lady the day we get there. Are you on?"

"I don't mind," said Slim, an eager something in his voice. "I'll bet the dame's all right."

"She's a queen, believe me," replied Buck. "Wait till you see her. I'm going to marry her, Slim. The ceremony was supposed to have been pulled off about two weeks ago, but I got drunk, and——"

"I get you, son," interrupted Slim, moving closer to his companion. The two stared in silence out over the cold lake.

Two days later a tug not much bigger than one of the *Elderdown's* smokestacks towed the big freighter to her dock. Once more hatches were opened —and it was pay day!

CHAPTER V.

PAY DAY.

IN the evening at seven o'clock, Buck was pacing impatiently up and down in the square in front of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. He and Slim had appointed the hour and place of meeting when they had come ashore late that afternoon.

As usual, Slim had repaired at once to his older sister's boarding house to give her part of his wages. Then he had wandered forth to the Big Bell Saloon, where his cronies were wont to gather. Most of the stokers of the *Elderdown* were hovering over the bar fiercely intent upon spending their wages. All hands "set 'em up," and again and again. Cronies kept coming, and Slim soon cast caution to the winds. As always, he was the commanding figure in the place, talking at the top of his voice, roaring orders at the barkeeper lustily.

It was there that Buck found him. He had waited in the square until his patience was exhausted, then he had begun a search. He had a natural suspicion that Slim would be at the stokers' favorite saloon, so his quest had been brief.

"Come along, Slim," he said, taking the big fellow firmly by the arm. "If we're going to see my girl you've got to cut the booze."

"Havin' little drink with th' boys," explained Slim, with some assumption of dignity. "What you havin', Buck?"

"Not a thing!" replied Buck, with emphasis. "You're not going to take any more, either. You didn't meet me as you said you would, but now you've got to keep your promise to go and see my girl."

"S'pose I do have another drink?" said Slim somewhat defiantly. "What then?"

"I'll beat you up, like I did once before; that's what!" threatened the younger man. "I say no more booze, and that goes!"

Slim glowered upon him savagely for a moment, then uttered a sheepish laugh. "You've got a punch, all right, buddy," he mumbled, "an' I ain't hankerin' for it. All right, le's go see your dame."

Slim proceeded to pay his reckoning at the bar, hiding his embarrassment under a belligerent dignity which silenced the covert jeers of his companions; then he swaggered out of the place with Buck, and allowed himself to be led away from his old haunts.

It was not long before Slim commented on the fact that Buck was clothed in new and fashionable attire, with shoes highly polished, face cleanly shaved, hair trimmed, and with a red flower in the lapel of his gray overcoat. "A dude," he muttered in disgust.

"Slim, you're almost drunk!" exclaimed Buck reprovingly.

"That's all right; I ain't a dude," retorted Slim resentfully.

"Forget it, Slim," said Buck curtly. "Let's go and get something to eat."

"Me eat wid you?" growled Slim, drawing back.

"Why not?"

"'Cause you're a dude, an' I'm a booze-fightin' shovel man," muttered Slim.

The transformation which Buck had undergone since leaving Slim at the dock struck the latter as constituting an impassable gulf, a something which demolished the comradeship which once had held so strongly between them.

"Come on, Slim," urged Buck, taking the other's arm.

"All right, jest to see if you mean it," answered the big stoker.

"I'm going to a restaurant where I know some people. I want to introduce you to some of them," explained Buck as they proceeded from the square.

"All right," grunted Slim. "Who ye takin' me to see, yer girl?"

"Yes," said Buck curtly, and they walked on in silence for a few minutes. Then, "Here we are, Slim," he announced.

For some time Slim had been thinking hard. Again the suspicions, the misgivings, the fears of former days were crowding his mind. They were no longer vague, no longer undefined and misty; they were concrete now, looming in menacing proportions as his troubled mind dwelt upon them. Buck had a girl. He was going to be married soon. Buck's marriage would end their friendship, shatter and demolish the comradeship which had meant so much to him. The stoker's soul cried out against the loss of the thing in life which latterly had been the sweetest to him. The consciousness of this dispossession, which smote him now with full force, quickly sobered him. How to cope with the situation he did not know, but he must act, and quickly. A sudden thought flew into the stoker's brain.

"W'at ye pushin' me fer?" he demanded, as Buck's hand was at the door of the restaurant. "Do ye think because ye knocked me down oncet, ye can boss me all the time? I'll show ye!"

With these words Slim made a lunge at his companion, a clumsy lunge which would have plunged them both through the plate-glass window, had it not been for Buck's agility. Buck seized the heavier man, fairly lifting him off his feet, and thrust him through the door into the eating house before the stoker could comprehend what was happening to him.

"Come in here!" ordered Buck. "Don't start anything!"

A second later Buck had slammed the stoker into a chair by a table. From the other end of the room a pretty, auburn-haired girl saw what was happening, and darted in the direction of the two men. The proprietor, from his place back of the cashier's counter, saw, too, and hurried to the spot.

"Hello, Mary," said Buck, addressing the girl, who was one of the waitresses. "He was mighty good to me on the boat," he added, nodding in the direction of Slim, "and I wanted you to meet him." Then Buck took a step nearer the girl, and whispered: "I've won out, and we——"

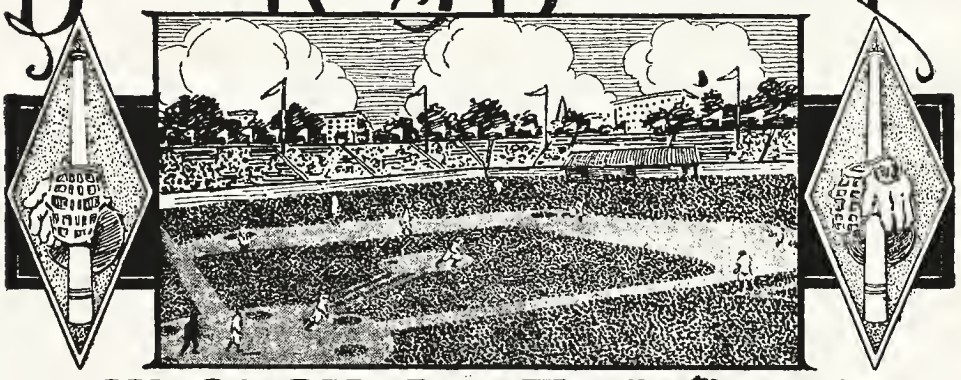
"Why, Buck!" exclaimed the girl suddenly, her eyes on Slim. "He's my brother!"

"Hello, sis!" called Slim almost simultaneously, jumping to his feet, and gathering the girl in his arms. "Buck's all right, sis; you bet he is. He can lick me, too!"

"You look better than you usually do when you come ashore, Slim," said the girl, looking at her brother somewhat sadly. "I'm glad to see you—sober."

Slim winced, but grinned sheepishly. "Well, I guess I wouldn't be now," he admitted, "but Buck was going to lick me. He's got a fierce punch! But he's good enough for my brother-in-law, anyhow, sis; and I reckon I got to do what he says if I keeps in with the family."

Brick King, Backstop



BY BURT L. STANDISH

FORMER CHAPTERS.

Read them in this abridged form, then enjoy the rest of the story.

CHRISTY KING, nicknamed "Brick" on account of his red hair, is engaged by Manager Frazer, of the Wolves, as a catcher, but is kept on the bench as a pinch hitter for many weeks. At last he gets a chance to play backstop in a game with the Blue Stockings, and wins instant popularity for his cleverness in signaling the pitcher and his apparent knowledge of the weak points of all the opposing batters.

"Smoke" Jordan, the Wolves' star twirler, dislikes King, and continually criticizes him for being penurious and unsociable. King warns him several times, but at last is so angered by his insults that he fights him. The manner in which he knocks Jordan out shows that he is a boxer of uncommon power, and a witness of the fight asserts that he recognizes him as the mysterious Western boxing celebrity, Jack Dugan.

King meets Jordan's sister, a clever, attractive girl, and she treats him disdainfully, and sarcastically intimates that he is conceited and selfish. Later he saves her from injury in a trolley-car accident, but she seems to regret his service, and still maintains her contempt for him.

Evelyn Sloane, a society girl and famous beauty, appears with a party in the grand stand at one of the games, and excites comment among the players. She is pointed out to King, and he becomes at once strangely silent. He falls down in his form during the game, but rallies and finishes brilliantly. Later he amazes all the players by going to the stand and engaging in intimate conversation with the society girl.

The mystery surrounding King deepens, and he amazes the men who have called him a "tightwad" by giving the old negro rubber of the team fifty dollars to pay for hospital treatment for his sick child. During a game Smoke Jordan becomes enraged at the taunts of some rowdies, and leaps into the stand to fight them. The rowdies attack him in overpowering numbers, and King goes to the rescue and saves him from a bad beating. Miss Jordan is grateful to King for aiding her brother, but Smoke is still sullen. The rowdies attack Jordan again in the street at night, and again King saves him, probably from death. Instead of gratitude, Jordan feels a churlish resentment at what he calls King's interference, and his sister rates him severely for his contemptible spirit.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

JORDAN'S slur against King, which had moved his sister to protest, was the more unwarranted because it had been Christy's own suggestion that they keep silent concerning the second scrimmage with the rowdies, and so avoid further disagreeable newspaper notoriety. Naturally Brick took good care to confide in no one, not even Pebble, and that astute young man exerted in vain every one of a dozen clever devices to learn the facts of the mysterious affair. Nor was he the only one to exhibit curiosity; many of the others were equally persistent in their efforts

to learn just what had happened, and they were becoming something of a nuisance when the loss of the final game of the series and the departure of the Wolves on their jaunt around the big circuit caused a welcome diversion.

This last defeat was due altogether to the weakened pitching staff. Every man did his best, and none showed up to better advantage than Brick King; but, with a sucession of "cripples" and immature youngsters in the box, the result was more or less of a foregone conclusion.

The visitors took their beating—it was not a bad one—philosophically, for the hard-won victory of the day before and the loss of a double-header by the team they had been pushing for the position had given them the long-sought foothold in the first division. They were still hanging on by their teeth, to be sure, knowing that a slight push would be sufficient to send them back again; but they were now booked for a series against the team which had been crowding the Dodgers all summer for last place, and, having an admirable chance of winning all four games, they could well afford to view the result of the last Specter contest with calmness.

During the first hour or so of the rather tedious journey to the Panthers' home town, Chris chanced to encounter Miss Jordan on the observation platform of their car. He would have retreated at once, but he felt that such haste would smack of ill breeding. Reluctantly he took a chair near the girl, determined to break away soon; but presently, to his surprise, he discovered a subtle but unmistakable change in her attitude toward him. True, she still bore herself with a dignity that was pronounced, but ere long it began to appear that she had abandoned the attitude of extreme antagonism toward him which had made her so disagreeable and sarcastic, and was endeavoring to treat him as she would any of the other men on the team. They chatted for over an hour, and Chris departed not a little puzzled over the fact that his opinion of the young woman was greatly altered.

The team's hotel was near the ball park. The proprietor of this hotel was evidently a person of decided originality, if one could judge from the various uncommon features both of management and construction about the hostelry. Chief among the latter features, and easily leading in popularity, was the garden. It was not one of those hackneyed affairs in which a leaky fountain is surrounded by a collection of fake palms gray with the dust of ages; on the contrary, it was a real garden inclosed by a high brick wall, and planted with trees and shrubs and flowers. Steps led down to it from the wide, brick-paved terrace at the rear of the building, making it possible for the guests to dine with this attractive stretch of verdure before them, and afterward, if they chose, take their coffee under the graceful branches of a Norway maple or beside a fragrant tangle of mignonette.

The place appealed to Christy in its novelty and freshness; magnetlike, it drew him down there to read the paper or indulge in an after-dinner smoke. Apparently it was also a favorite spot with Miss Jordan, and there the two were quite likely to encounter each other several times a day. There was not the least appearance of premeditation in these meetings; certainly Brick, at least, never thought of such a thing. They simply met with a courteous nod or a good morning, occasionally pausing for a few minutes to chat about the general news or the baseball situation.

Usually it was the latter topic of which they spoke, that being the subject which was always uppermost in King's mind. And he was not long in discovering that the girl's knowledge of the game was very different from that of Mrs. Betts, who had caught up the jargon of the diamond and babbled superficially, generally quite absurdly, about things which were in reality utter Greek to her.

Miss Jordan knew the game thoroughly, and her grasp of the situation was astonishing. She had the strength and weakness of every rival organization down to a fine point, and her judg-

ment of individual players displayed soundness and keen insight which would have done credit to Ben Frazer himself.

Before long Christy was surprised to find that he had fallen into the habit of discussing various points with her exactly as if she had been one of the players. In fact, more than once he caught himself thinking what a good fellow she really was. There was nothing in the least mannish about her, as one usually interprets the term, but her outlook upon life and people held much of a man's simplicity and directness. Her fresh, breezy independence of thought and action, unspoiled by moods or sentimentality, made one think of a girl brought up in the spacious freedom of a Western ranch.

This was the point of view of mere man, likely in certain cases to see no farther than the end of his own nose. Molly Jordan was really playing with fire, and she knew it. At first she placated her conscience with sophistries. Smoke's rudeness and ingratitude to the man who had placed him under such obligations practically forced her to treat King with a certain amount of civility, if only to try to atone in a measure. Moreover, having cautiously sounded Pebble Stone regarding the details of that first fight in the clubhouse, which had been the primary cause of her dislike for the catcher, she was chagrined to learn how entirely Neil had been to blame for the whole affair. She had been in the wrong; she had been shamefully intolerant and unjust. The least she could do would be to endeavor by every means in her power to obliterate the unpleasant impression she had made.

Having once arrived at this decision, Molly found it impossible to draw back. Those commonplace little chats became more and more frequent. She felt sure that King regarded her merely as a good friend and pleasant companion. Now and then the frank, pleasant quality of his friendship hurt her; it was so close to something deeper, yet so totally different. These momentary stabs were not long enduring. He seemed to like her, even though this liking was of the cool, friendly sort bestowed on Stone and other members of the team.

Miss Jordan asked herself a question as she sat just below the terrace railing on the last night of their stay, staring absently into the shadowy darkness of the fragrant garden. She was quite alone save for an isolated smoker or two on the terrace. The members of the team were indulging in some sort of jubilation—strictly stag—to celebrate their fourth consecutive victory over the Panthers; the women were indoors playing bridge. Her cheeks were warm, there was a flutter in her heart, she whispered words softly to herself. Nothing she had said or done—no look, even, of hers—could be construed by the most captious critic as an attempt to lead him on. There had been no attempt at deception. She had simply been her own natural self, rigorously purged of every trace of softness and sentimentality. With a conscience at ease on that score, why should she not ask herself the question? Why should she not allow herself to hope a little? It was so pleasant to hope.

Resting her head against the high back of the bench, she closed her eyes and let herself relax. With a mind so full, it did not seem possible for her to fall asleep, yet when she raised her lids it was with a surprised realization that some one was standing at the terrace railing almost directly above her. The pungent tang of a cigarette drifted down to her.

"You're an odd chap, Chris." It was the voice of Pebble Stone, superficially light, but with a touch of seriousness in it. "When it comes to the ladies, you pass 'em up. 'Frosty' is your middle name. Sometimes I wonder if you're really human."

A pause followed, drawn out to such a length that Pebble was evidently stricken with a sudden uneasiness. "Now, don't go and get crabbed," he said. "Take a joke."

King laughed. "When it comes to the ladies," he returned, "a decent man behaves decently—especially if he's tied

up. Now, don't try to play the pump, for you know I'm a poor hand to answer questions when I don't feel like it. How about a little game of pool before we hit the hay?"

"Oh, you Sphinx!" said Stone. "Spot me five and I'll go you."

They moved away, the clicking of their heels echoing through the silent garden. Their footsteps died out. The girl sat rigid beneath the terrace rail, her fingers interlocked in a painful grip.

Presently she rose and moved steadily toward the steps, her slender, white-clad figure appearing suddenly like a ghost in the square of light from the brilliant doorway. Quite calmly she entered the hotel. Beside the bridge table she paused a moment to laugh at Mrs. Betts' petulance over her partner's stupidity, then went on to the elevator.

In her room she turned the key in the lock and switched on the lights. A few minutes she stood still and thoughtful before the dressing table. Then she laughed. It was quite a different sort of laugh from the one she had uttered downstairs. There was nothing mirthful about it—not even a pretense.

"Tied up!" she said aloud, in a cold voice. "Married, of course!"

Her hands dropped to the dressing table, and her slim body seemed to sag, much of her weight resting momentarily on those slender fingers.

"Married!" she repeated. "That's where his salary goes. He's probably even got—a family!"

She laughed again. All at once, catching sight of her face in the mirror, she stared fixedly at the reflection several seconds. Then, with a swift movement, she reached up and snapped out the lights.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WOLVES CLIMB.

IN the bustle of the early-morning departure Brick King failed to notice anything unusual in Miss Jordan's manner. Once settled on the train, he observed her deep in a game of bridge with three other women of the party. The discovery surprised him a bit, for he had not supposed that she cared for the game. Being in a position to do so, he unconsciously fell to watching her style of play, and soon perceived that she was a mistress of finesse, and seemed after the playing off of one or two tricks to know precisely how the remaining cards were distributed. No person lacking deep interest in the game could play it with such skill and absorption, and Christy was puzzled to know why the women had so often found her disinclined to indulge. As she was evidently settled there for the whole of the three-hour trip, the catcher presently tossed aside his paper and sought the smoking compartment, where the inevitable poker game was in full swing.

For a man who did not play, the backstop had frequently displayed no slight knowledge of this national pastime. He had a habit of drifting in when the game was in full swing, and taking up a position from which he could follow its progress. A close observer might have noticed an eager look in his eyes as he kept track of every play, and more than once when some one failed to make the most of a good hand or overbet a weak one he gave utterance to impulsive comment. Until recently these criticisms had drawn forth sundry sarcastic references to the fact that the game was open, no one being barred, or suggestions that, since he was such a shark, it was a wonder he wouldn't sit into it once in a while, and relieve them of their oppressive burden of superfluous coin.

Lately, however, these remarks had become less frequent. Since the incident of Uncle Eph and the fifty-dollar bill, Jordan or Callahan were the only ones who referred to King as a tightwad, and their sneers were received so coldly that the two disgruntled members of the club usually relapsed into grouchy silence. Whatever the cause of the catcher's apparent penuriousness, the majority of the Wolves had decided that he was not a tightwad by nature.

The game following close on the arrival at the home town of the White

Wings left Christy no time for a talk with Miss Jordan even if that young woman had made it possible. But after dinner, with the satisfying glow of successful accomplishment still upon him, and making for his efforts the feeble excuse that he felt a desire to discuss their hopes and plans with a sympathetic, understanding person, the realization was brought home to Brick that the girl was deliberately avoiding him.

He could not understand it, and his first impulse was to waylay her and ask her plainly what the trouble was. With this in mind, he cornered her the next morning after breakfast.

The interview was brief, and he came away with his face faintly flushed, his jaws squared stubbornly. There had been no repetition of those biting, sarcastic tongue stabs with which she had favored him in the early days of their acquaintance; she had simply been cold, indifferent, with a touch of contempt that was more apparent in her manner than in anything she actually said. His conscience free from any possible cause of offense, Christy grew suddenly indignant at this exhibition of feminine caprice. He asked no questions. If she chose to indulge in such senseless vagaries, henceforth she could practice them on some one else.

Nevertheless, as the days passed, he missed her cheery companionship more than he would have supposed possible. He seemed swiftly to develop moods, growing sullen, losing his enthusiasm, and ceasing to take his customary keen interest in the surprising progress the club was making.

The showing made by the Wolves was astonishing. Not only did it attract attention all over the country, but it was beginning to implant sensations of uneasiness in the breasts of various rival managers. The "dark horse" is always an annoying feature in any contest, and the baseball team which suddenly develops a winning streak well along in a close season is quite the most abhorred of the class.

Until recently the Blue Stockings and Hornets had been seesawing back and forth in the van of the race, with the Specters at their heels, and near enough to be considered and counted on.

The beginning of the Wolves' advance caused little comment. It was regarded merely as a temporary rally which could not last. The belief was universal that it would soon peter out, and the club would drop back to the position around which it had hovered for several seasons. Frazer had practically the same old bunch of twirlers; there had been a slight shift in the infield, and a new man was being used a lot behind the pan; but there was really nothing, said the experts, to warrant the belief that the present spurt was likely to continue.

But when the Wolves broke even in the series with the Specters—and that in spite of a crippled pitching staff—baseballdom began to sit up and take notice. The Wolves continued to play exceptional baseball, and threatened to upset all calculations. Nevertheless, few really felt that there was any danger of this hitherto unconsidered club bagging the pennant; but a certain restlessness was rife among the top-liners, and there was a tendency each day to make a careful study of the Wolves' playing record the moment it became available.

Naturally, the home papers made a great noise over the exploits of the team, and more than one stated that Ben Frazer was out for blood. Over the crushing defeat of the Panthers they jubilated loudly; but when four straight games were snatched from the much stronger White Wings, the joyous roar of the home press echoed throughout the land. That landslide, combined with a simultaneous slump of the Specters, made a big change in the standing of the teams. The Wolves forged dramatically ahead, passing the Specters at a bound, and suddenly menaced the two leading teams.

Never was there a prettier or more sensational uphill fight. And when the situation had become such that by bagging the odd trick in the forthcoming series with the Hornets they could drop that formidable organization back into third position, and lift themselves with-

in one notch of the top, the Wolves, in their fierce, almost bloodthirsty hunger for a victory, fully justified, for the first time in many seasons. the sobriquet that had been applied to them.

Never, save during a world's championship struggle, had there been such widespread excitement among the baseball "bugs" of the entire country. In every big city, and many which were not so large, mobs surged around the bulletin boards each afternoon, blocking the streets, and frequently necessitating the calling out of reserves to clear the way for traffic. In most of the newspapers the baseball stories sprawled arrogantly all over the front page. At the Hornet park every box and reserved seat was gobbled up long before the visiting team reached the town, and on the day of the first game sunrise beheld a line of weary but persistent fans waiting outside the gate of the grounds.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNDER PRESSURE.

MEANWHILE, the man who had really started the ball rolling, and whose splendid work had gone far toward keeping it in motion, was either developing a mild case of nerves, or, as Pebble Stone suggested, he was slightly off his feed.

So far his playing had not suffered, but the observing shortstop noticed that, off the field, his friend displayed signs of an unwonted preoccupation which was puzzling, if not actually disquieting. Physically he appeared to be in good shape, but he was often absorbed and distracted, as if there was something on his mind; and these periods of thoughtfulness were varied by curious little mannerisms difficult, if not impossible, to understand.

Calendars, for instance, seemed to possess an inexplicable interest for him. He rarely passed one without glancing at it, usually with a frown. Just before their departure for the camping ground of the Hornets, Pebble came upon him in the hotel writing room, the contents of his bill case spread out before him, engaged in intricate figuring on a slip of paper, when he should have been upstairs packing his bag. The man might have been making up his accounts, but somehow the time and place did not seem in accord with that humdrum occupation; and Stone, worried for fear some unknown trouble or difficulty might end in breaking up King's game at this crucial moment, hotfooted it to the manager with what he had seen.

Slight as it was, Ben Frazer had not been blind to the change in his prize backstop. But Brick had been putting up an almost flawless game all around the circuit, and when a man is doing that there is no really good reason why a manager should butt into his private affairs with the inquiry as to what he is thinking about when he scowls at a calendar, or why he counts up his money with such evident anxiety. To discuss his private financial affairs at all with King would be a delicate matter, considering the rumors which were rife of his extreme penuriousness, and Frazer was wondering just how he could come at it when the time arrived to go aboard their private car. After the train was in motion the "old man" sought a quiet corner, and settled down. He had scarcely made himself comfortable when the object of his solicitude strolled down the aisle and paused beside him.

"Ben," said King casually, "would you mind advancing me forty out of this week's salary?"

Frazer stared. the incident of the bank book vividly in mind. Recovering himself, he took out his wallet.

"How'll you have it?" he asked quietly.

"Anyway, so it's coin of the realm," said the catcher. "Thanks! I'll remember this if I have the chance to do you a favor."

Brick was turning away when the sudden clearing of Frazer's throat made him glance back inquiringly.

"Look here, Chris," said the manager solicitously, "are you worrying about anything?"

King's eyebrows went up in a swift expression of interrogation. "Worry-

ing?" he parried. "What the deuce gives you that notion?"

"Well," explained the manager, flushing a little, "for the last week you've certainly acted as if you had something on your mind, and Stone says you've developed a trick of scowling at—er—ealendars."

"Scowling at calendars!" echoed Christy.

"Yes; looking at every one you see, and frowning. And to-night, when we were just about ready to take the bus, you were counting up your money in the writing room, and your bag not packed. I don't want to butt in, son, but if you're in any trouble——"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Chris, his brow furrowing. Then he broke into a sudden, infectious laugh. "So I had old Peb going, did I?" he chuckled. "Don't know as I blame him, at that. Well, I'll promise you, Ben, not to make eyes at any more calendars after to-morrow. As for the money, I was hard up, but you've fixed that all right."

"Hard up!" ejaculated Frazer incredulously. "For that little wad?"

The catcher nodded, his eyes still twinkling a little. "Don't worry, Ben," he said, with a touch of seriousness in his voice. "I'm not going to lose my grip or go stale, or anything like that. What's more, I have a hunch there'll be a little extra steam for me to work off in the game to-morrow. Does that satisfy you?"

The manager looked relieved. "You bet! It's up to us to sting the Hornets in this series. That's what made me butt in. I reckon you savvy."

"Sure," said Christy.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FOOL'S GOLD.

HAD not King's manner restored the manager to perfect confidence in him, the inexplicable behavior of his backstop next day would have come close to giving Ben Frazer heart failure. After a morning of admirable practice and a hastily eaten lunch, Christy announced that he had a little personal matter to look after which might use up the better part of an hour. "I'll be on the grounds in plenty of time, though," he concluded, observing the sudden anxious expression in Frazer's face. "Don't worry about that."

The manager forbore comment, though he could not suppress a frown as his eyes followed the progress of the long-limbed, powerful figure that crossed the lobby and passed out into the street. Everything seemed to hinge on this series, and deep down in his heart Ben Frazer knew that if Brick King should lose his stride, or even fail to give the very best that was in him, hopes of the pennant, lately aroused in the hearts of the Wolves, would melt like snow before the warm March sun.

Oblivious to the anxiety he was causing, Christy leaped into a waiting taxi. His cheeks were faintly flushed, his eyes bright. The fingers of one hand —strong, brown, well-kept fingers— beat an impatient tattoo on the tufted seat. Once, catching a shadowy glimpse of himself in the darkened glass behind the chauffeur's back, he raised one hand and fumbled with an already perfectly tied scarf.

The taxi sped on, past shops and apartment houses, past smaller dwellings of brick and brownstone, and finally whirled into a wide avenue lined with spacious marble-fronted mansions of the wealthy. Before one of the most striking of these the chauffeur swerved to the curb and stopped.

Christy was on the sidewalk almost before the wheels ceased to revolve. Ordering the man to wait, he ran up the steps. A second later the bronze door was opened by a liveried footman who took the caller's hat, and ushered him without delay into a room on the left of the square, baronial hall.

It was the drawing-room, though almost unrecognizable in its summer garb of swathing net and protective linen covers. Opposite the entrance was a magnificent carved chimneypiece of white marble; standing near it, her face turned toward the doorway, was the beautiful Miss Sloane.

Her hands hung straight at her sides,

her cheeks were faintly touched with color. The wonderful, glowing eyes, fixed on his face, stirred Christy's heart to a tumultuous activity. Manlike, he missed completely an intangible something in her pose, the significance of which any woman would have perceived instantly. Insensibly he endowed her with all the longing and impatience the weary, interminable separation had bred in his own breast. She was waiting for him! As he swiftly crossed the room, hands outstretched, he thought she had never been so lovely.

"Evelyn!" he said in a low, quick voice. "Luck was surely with me to find you here to-day!"

She permitted him to hold her hands for a scant second before she withdrew them. Something in his glance made her lids flutter momentarily, but they were swiftly raised again.

"It must have been," she agreed, in a soft, sweet voice. People who knew the older Sloanes often wondered how the daughter came by those fascinating, low-pitched tones. "Dad and I dropped in only last night, and we leave again to-morrow. It is odd that you should have hit upon the only day since June that the house has been open."

Christy laughed joyously. "And this special day of all others," he reminded her. "It's fate, of course."

A perplexed wrinkle marred the smoothness of Miss Sloane's low forehead. "Special day?" she repeated in a puzzled tone.

"Surely you remember?" he protested, his face clouding a little. "You can't have forgotten that the time is up to-day."

"Oh!" The color deepened suddenly in the girl's face; her dark eyes widened. "You don't mean to say that—that you've——"

She paused, and, half turning, hesitated an instant before moving over to the big chair behind her. "We may as well sit down, don't you think?" she suggested quietly.

Still he did not see. His mind was so absorbed in the great news he had to tell her that there was no room left for anything else. Picking up a fragile chair, the gilt legs of which protruded grotesquely from beneath the swathing linen, he planted it in front of her and sat down. With elbows resting on his knees, and square chin cupped in his big palms, he smiled at her with a keen, boyish enthusiasm.

"I've done it!" he declared impulsively. "That's exactly what! Your father never thought I could, and I don't blame him much. Until dad died and everything went to smash, I'd never put in a stroke of work in my life." The smile faded, and his eyes grew serious. "I won't try to blame any one else; I was simply brainless and selfish, that's all. I never guessed how things really were; no one seemed to but dad. There was always plenty of money for me to throw away, and I certainly squandered it four ways from the ace."

A grim smile flickered for an instant on his lips, and was gone. The girl's hands, resting in her lap, had found each other, and the slim, shapely fingers began to lace and interlace nervously.

"But when the smash came, and I found there was hardly a penny left, it brought me up sharp," King went on more rapidly. "Your father completed the good work. I'm afraid he never liked me, Evelyn. Our engagement was just tolerated, that's all, and he took the first chance that came to break it off. He was right, of course. With no money and no way of making any, I'd have been a cad to think of marrying. I'd have released you myself if he hadn't been so very prompt with his ultimatum. Jove! That was a laying out he gave me. He hit straight from the shoulder, and some of the things he said sting even now when I think of them. I've often wondered since then why he ever gave me that one chance. I suppose"—his lips curved whimsically—"it was because he wanted to get rid of me gracefully, and still retain the luxury of feeling that he had been generous. 'If you can bring me ten thousand dollars three years from to-day, earned by the sweat of your brow without help from any one,' he said, 'I'll agree to leave the matter to Evelyn.'

Of course, it never occurred to him that I could possibly do it. But the three years are up to-day, and—here's the ten thousand."

Slipping one hand into his pocket, he drew forth a slim pigskin bill case, from which he took a narrow strip of white paper and a small roll of bills, dropping them into the girl's lap.

With hands which were not quite steady, Miss Sloane spread them out mechanically. Her head was bent low to hide the crimson flood in her cheeks. Her heart was beating unevenly, and she was conscious of a chill, unpleasant tingling in the regions of her spine. The white slip was a certified check for the sum of nine thousand nine hundred and twenty dollars; the bills consisted of three twenties and two tens. She read every word on the check twice to gain time.

"But where in the world did you get it all?" she forced herself to ask at length.

Christy smiled wryly. "In every decent way I could rake and scrape it together," he answered. "Baseball mostly. That's the only blooming thing I got out of college. I dropped the 'don' off my name so nobody'd be disturbed, and got a job in the bush two weeks after leaving here. In the winter I worked principally with a construction gang in Colorado. Two thousand of the money came from a lucky land speculation in Pueblo, and another thousand I got for knocking out a boxer in Denver. But it's mostly been raked together by digging and saving. Would you believe that the fellows in the club call me a tightwad? Doesn't jibe very well with the reputation Chris Kingdon had around here, does it? It's gone against the grain sometimes. But always I've had the thought of the goal before me to help, and the remembrance of your words when we said good-by. Do you remember them, Evelyn? You said that no matter——"

"Don't!"

The word came from the girl's lips with all the force of a pent-up emotion which had been gaining strength with every second that she listened to his voice. Regret at having to hurt him, a little shame, and a vast deal more of annoyance at the fact that she was being made so uncomfortable, were all mingled in that single expressive utterance which opened the man's eyes with a sudden clearness that was staggering. She had ceased to care!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WOMAN WHO DID NOT KNOW.

MISS SLOANE shot a swift glance at his face, set, stony, with all the light and laughter swept from it. Then she hastily dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry," she murmured in a low tone. "I hoped it wouldn't come to this."

She paused. There was no answer. Presently she went on again more fluently, more composedly. The lovely Evelyn's experience in refusing men was wide. She had turned down a great many of every sort and condition, and so much repetition had made the rite comparatively simple.

"I hoped you'd find some one else," she said in that sweet, gentle voice, full of impalpable regret which was reserved for men she really liked, "or that you wouldn't get the money—or something. I didn't want to have to—to tell you that I couldn't care enough."

She faltered a bit. It wasn't as easy as it had been in some of the other cases. If he would only stir or say something! She pictured him sitting there stunned and broken by the shock, and it was not altogether amusing, for she had been really very fond of him in the old days. But now, of course, anything more than friendship was quite impossible; even that might have its awkward sides. She must remember this, and not allow her pity to get the better of her common sense.

"I see now that I should have written you of this," she went on slowly, fumbling with the bills in her lap. "I wish I had. It might have kept you from going into that brutal fight." Her color deepened, and she frowned a little at the remembrance of her feelings when the papers came out with their positive identification of him as the

sensational "Jack Dugan." Insensibly some of that aversion crept into her voice. "It didn't seem like you to do such a thing," she continued more rapidly. "I can't imagine anything inducing a man of your sort to stoop to such an exhibition before a crowd of rough, common people. I suppose the money was a temptation, but it seems a pity you couldn't have made it in speculation as you did some of——"

She broke off with a sudden start of amazement, for Christy had laughed. It was not a mirthful sound. Indeed, there was a harsh, hard undercurrent in it which seemed to tell of restrained emotion, almost of bitterness. But as the girl swiftly raised her eyes she was bewildered to find no trace of the broken, stunned despair she had expected to see in his face. His expression was somewhat serious and faintly cynical, to be sure, but of anything more tragic there was not a single sign.

Miss Sloane felt inexplicably annoyed at the almost casual effect her rejection seemed to have. She could know nothing, of course, of the sudden revulsion of feeling that had swept over the man. Quite without realizing it, she had given him an insight into her real self which he had never dreamed of before. Always her apparent sympathy and understanding had appealed strongly to him, but now he was filled with an uncomfortable suspicion that his love had created qualities which she did not possess. From her manner more than from her actual words it was plain that not only had she completely missed the motive which had taken him into the prize ring at Denver, but that his action had aroused in her something bordering on aversion.

Suddenly through his mind ran a stanza of Kipling's "Vampire":

"Oh, the years we waste and the tears we waste—
And the work of our head and hand
Belong to the woman who did not know—
(And now we know that she never could know)
And did not understand."

It was then that he straightened in his chair and laughed; and, meeting her astonished, disapproving gaze, he softened that laugh into a smile that seemed to amaze her even more by its ready acceptance of her decision.

"No need to prolong the agony, Evelyn," he said calmly. "I might have guessed that there was a chance of your changing your mind in three years—but, somehow, I didn't."

He took the certified check and the money, the sum total of his savings from three years' work of his head and hand, and crumpled them carelessly into his pocket. Then he stood up, erect and tall.

"Pardon me for boring you with all that lengthy autobiography," he said quietly. "When a man thinks the same thoughts and keeps the same point of view for three years he loses track of the possibility that other people may have—progressed. You should have shut me up in the beginning."

She arose quickly, the flush dying from her cheeks. She understood. He was not really callous; it was simply his way of hiding his emotion. He had always been like that. She hesitated an instant, her gaze fixed on his face. His gray eyes returned her look gravely, but with a touch of humor in them. A whimsical smile played about his lips. His hair, the color of old Domingo mahogany, was ruffed into a wavy crest above his wide forehead. That slight touch of carelessness brought back to her with sudden disconcerting vividness the many times when she had run her fingers through his thick, smooth thatch to tease him. It was the old charm and fascination returning to grip her, and for a brief moment she found herself wondering whether she had done the wise thing. She thrust the doubt hurriedly from her, but the spell still lingered, making her oddly reluctant to let him go.

"Christy," she said at last in a voice which was not quite steady, "you won't let this trouble you too much? You won't let it turn you back to—to the wild things you used to do before——"

This time his laugh was unrestrained and genuine. "Don't be afraid of my

going to the dogs, Evelyn," he assured her. "I've been bucking the world too long to have the slightest hankering for the sort of folly that came near putting me to the bad altogether. You've given me a jolt, but I dare say I'll get over it in time, the same as other men who have been turned down. Now that I understand, there's nothing left except to wish you every possible happiness—and say good-by."

The touch of his hand sent a sudden thrill through her. The impulse to hold him came on her again, strong and almost overpowering. Her lips parted impulsively, but somehow she could bring herself to say nothing save a faint good-by. But as he crossed the room her gaze never left the fine figure, the wide shoulders, the well-shaped head, the ruffled crest of glinting, red-brown hair. And long after he had vanished she stood motionless, her eyes, full of a strange wistfulness, still fixed upon the empty doorway.

Out in the glaring sunlight of early afternoon, Christy paused an instant at the head of the marble steps, the smile lingering on his lips. Suddenly his eyes widened, and a look of bewildered amazement flashed into them. He still smarted from the ordeal through which he had just passed; some of the hurt the girl's unconscious revelation of herself had brought to him still lingered. But for all of it, for all of the stab his self-esteem had suffered, had come the astonishing realization that he did not really care—that he was glad!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

STILL RISING.

THOSE who saw the first game between the Hornets and the Wolves could not complain that it lacked interest. It was one of those hair-trigger contests that stretch out into extra innings, where hits are few, errors infrequent, and the fans wait breathlessly for the break they feel sure must come some time, the moment of which can never be foretold with any approach to accuracy.

To the surprise of those "wise guys" who feel that the opening game of a series counts for about twice as much as any other, and who consequently hold the theory that a manager should open with the very best pitching material he possesses, Frazer put Mace Russell into the box. This youngster, whose comparatively brief experience in fast company had been fraught with few pyrotechnic displays, was held in more or less disdain by opposing batters. But old Ben had been too long in the business to choose a twirler haphazard. Weeks before he had sized up the situation perfectly. Under ordinary conditions Russell was far from being a great pitcher; he was not even a dependable one, because of the fact that, though having curves, speed, and fine control, he consistently failed to use his head. But with Brick King to do the thinking, the combination was irresistible for the simple reason that Mace realized his weakness, and submitted to the catcher's judgment as no one of the other twirlers, save perhaps Chick O'Brien, had ever brought himself to do. Frazer was, therefore, banking on Christy when he started the vital series with this young pitcher, and results proved his wisdom.

Russell pitched the game of his life. For twelve innings, seven of which were hitless, he held down the opposition. During that time the Hornets twice changed the man on the mound, but to little advantage, for in the beginning of the twelfth, with a man on second, Scrappy Betts hammered out a two-bagger which brought in the solitary run of the contest, and with it victory for the Wolves.

The second game, with Jordan in the box and Chris still behind the pan, proved one of those contests which are won more through the errors of one team than by superlative brilliancy on the part of the other.

A man of Smoke's experience and undoubted ability could not be absolutely bad unless he actually lost his head and blew up, but the contrast between his work and the showing made by the younger pitcher the day before was too marked to be very palatable to

the chap who had for several years been the star performer of the organization. Happily no great pitching brilliancy was necessary. The Hornets, by an inexplicable slump, practically threw away the game, to the huge disgust of some thirty thousand ardent fans that filled the stands and bleachers to overflowing.

The demeanor of that crowd under adversity was in such vivid contrast to the behavior of the followers of the game in their home town that more than one of the visiting team noticed it and commented thereon. There was none of that carping spirit and readiness to find fault which had rasped the nerves of each member of the Wolves at one time or another. Now and then some particularly atrocious blunder drew from the throng a rumbling, concentrated groan, or here and there an isolated spectator or group of them would utter a barking sarcasm; but in the main the errors or bad luck of the Hornets brought forth only silence. The crowd saved its breath to cheer and encourage their own team and to howl and shriek at the opposition.

They were not particularly sportsmanlike. They did their level best to break up the Wolves' batters and pitchers. A fine play on the part of the visitors was usually greeted with groans or dead silence. They shrilly disputed every decision against them. Their attitude was: "May the best team win—but ours is the best." Yet somehow Christy's heart warmed toward them. He was not surprised at the splendid personnel of the Hornets. In such an atmosphere a man could not fail from lack of encouragement. The experience which had embittered King's own early days with the big league would be impossible here. The supporters of the team might not be just or discriminating or logical; perhaps they were quite lacking in all those cold-blooded, reasoning virtues; but at least they were warmly and humanly loyal.

The third game of the series was a rattler. Neither team showed anything like perfect form. Breath-taking errors alternated with streaks of amazing brilliancy, and the fans spent most of their time on their feet. Van Sicklen, Lacombe, and Chick O'Brien in succession occupied the mound for the Wolves, while a like variety of twirlers were used by the home team.

The Hornets drew first blood, getting a run in the sixth inning, but in the first of the eighth the visitors evened up. In the ninth both teams scored single tallies. After that four barren, thrilling innings passed before the Wolves finally forced a single man across the plate and took the lead. The veteran O'Brien, throwing caution to the winds, and pitching with every ounce of steam and skill he possessed, managed to hold down the enemy, and the crucial, deciding game was won.

The flare of excitement which flamed out across the country surpassed anything that had gone before. The redoubtable Hornets had been slammed into third position by this second-division bunch, unfeared and unheeded little more than a month ago. Nothing like it had happened for years. Baseball experts began to put forth belated prophecies and explanations. Critical analyses of Ben Frazer's pitching staff, and, later, of each separate member of this marvelously successful club, appeared in rapidly increasing volume. Brick King was mentioned more and more often as the most promising backstop the season had produced.

As for the Wolves themselves, a feeling of suspense became apparent throughout the club. With the winning of the decisive game of the present series there was no let down of tension. There was a fight ahead of them which would be even more grilling than the present contest. Characteristically, most of Frazer's players had resolutely thrust it out of their minds up to now, but they could close their eyes to it no longer. Whether they lost the concluding game of the Hornet series or not, they were now in position to battle for the championship with the famous Blue Stockings, the previous year's pennant winners, and hitherto conceded to be the strongest team in the league.

In spite of their mild-sounding cog-

nomen, the Blue Stockings were noted for coming up to the scratch. Jack Kennedy, the veteran manager—taciturn, astute, and resourceful—had made his motto the ancient saying that no game was lost till the last man was out, and without exception his men played with that spirit. They never fought so hard as when in a corner with something big and vital at stake, and then they showed a bulldog spirit which made them the terror of their opponents.

The last time these teams had met, the Wolves had bagged one game out of four, and nearly won another. But, with the pennant depending on the result, this would be a very different matter. They would have to take two games at least—possibly three. It was no wonder that, although they were on the crest of a wave that seemed sweeping them to victory, they wore faces grave and set.

For the first time Christy began to feel the strain under which he labored. The mere physical exertion of catching thirty-four innings in three consecutive days, although considerable, would scarcely have affected to a great extent a man of his perfect condition and uncommon recuperative powers. He believed it was the tremendous responsibility, the ceaseless mental worry, the necessity for being eternally on the alert in a dozen different directions at once that had told on him, and left him at the end of the third game utterly worn out.

In the morning he felt fresher. But, after watching Brick unobtrusively for an hour or so, Frazer announced his intention of giving him a rest that afternoon, and putting in Biff Callahan.

"It isn't as if we had a chance to rest up before we tackle Jack Kennedy's bunch," he explained. "We've got to sail right into 'em to-morrow, and I don't want to run any chances of your not being fresh for the opening game."

Chris protested that he was feeling as fine as a fiddle after the night's rest, but the manager stuck to his plans. Bill Sweeney went into the box, to be helped out later by two other pitchers, and Biff took the other end of the groove.

The Wolves lost, five to two. To win the pennant they would have to take three games out of four in the concluding series.

TO BE CONTINUED.

The next installment will appear in the November mid-month TOP-NOTCH, which will be in your hands on October 15th—about two weeks after you finish reading this. News dealers or the publishers will supply back numbers if you have missed any previous chapters.

Not to be Denied

ONE of the stories which the great English general, Lord Wolseley, delighted in telling against himself was of an occasion when he met a number of orderlies hastening across the barrack yard with pails of what he conceived to be steaming soup for the soldiers. Always solicitous for the men's welfare and comfort, Wolseley stopped one of the men and ordered him to remove the lid. It was promptly removed.

"Let me taste it," said the officer.

"But, plaze, yer——" began the orderly.

"Let me taste it, I say," and he tasted it. "Disgraceful!" he exclaimed, a moment after; "it is for all the world like dishwater."

"Plaze, yer honor," gasped the orderly, "and that's what it is!"

Not So Far Wrong

WHEN General Grant was in Japan the Japanese premier, Prince Kung, desiring to compliment the general by telling him that he was born to command, tried it in English, with this result:

"Sire, brave general, you was made to order."

Signals Against Him

By John Milton Edwards.

(A COMPLETE NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

A MISSING SEMICOLON.

LANSING, the day man at Sweetbriar, was tilted back comfortably in a chair, his elevated heels on his order book, smoking a fat cigar with a gold band, and dumping the ashes on his clip in lieu of an ash tray. Presently he heard a slight cough close at hand, looked up, and nearly dropped out of his chair.

In the open half door, over the shelf where trainmen signed their orders, were framed the head and shoulders of William Horace Harding. It was a brown, pleasant face, not to say handsome, and it wore an expression of mingled yearning and determination. The cap above the face was ragged, and the coat and flannel shirt that covered the square shoulders were seedy, all testifying eloquently to the fact that Harding had fallen upon evil days.

"Hello, you old lightning jerker!" called William.

"Why, Billy!" Lansing, genuinely pleased, took his feet off the table, and crossed the room with outstretched hand. "How's the world using you?"

"Well, it's my oyster, but if you look sharp maybe you'll discover that I haven't opened it yet. I lasted six months at the mines. Dropped a skip to the bottom of the five-hundred-foot level—cable parted—but I survived that. Then the old donkey hoister let go—it had been condemned—and I might even have weathered that if my old reputation as a jonah hadn't drifted up from the Jerkwater Division. The super ditched me, and I went down to Burt's Gap, looking for a job. Nothing doing. All the people there seemed to know me, and to feel positive that I left a trail of calamity wherever I went."

"Tough luck!" murmured Lansing. "But it's the case, ain't it, Billy?"

"Looks like it," sighed Harding; "and that's a fact." He reached into his pocket for a pipe. "Old man," he went on, "I haven't had a smoke since day before yesterday, and the smell of that fat perfecto of yours has put me all in a quiver. How about a pipeful?"

"Is it as bad as that?" queried Lansing sympathetically. "Come in, Billy, and I'll blow you to all the smoking you want."

He dumped an armful of supplies out of a chair, and pushed it hospitably forward. Then he opened a drawer, took out a half-filled bag of tobacco, and tossed it to his caller.

"Put that in your pocket, son," he went on. "Had anything to eat today?"

"Never mind about the eats—this will

save my life." He slumped wearily into the chair, filled the bowl of the brier with eager fingers, and touched a match to it. "Ah, this is something like!" he finished, and settled back, contented.

"Where did you go from the Gap?" went on the day man.

"Junction," was the reply. "Got a job freighting. Held it a little longer than usual before Johnny Hardluck threw the switch—three months. Then the mules ran away and scattered the wagon for three miles along the trail. Might have lived that down, I guess, if an ex-railroader from Crook City hadn't hit the camp, opened up his chimney, and spread the same old story about me. They gave me my time, and I went back to the Junction. A short order place took me on, and I peddled ham-and, spuds, and coffee among the tables."

"Great Scott!" murmured Lansing, horrified.

"Awful, of course," agreed Harding; "but a man's got to live. I lasted a month, at that—broke so many dishes the bill amounted to more than my salary. Then I tried the mines again, tramping from one stamp mill to another. But I was too well known, and no one wanted me. I made up my mind that I was foolish, moseying around all outdoors with the jinx chasing me from pillar to post. So I'm going back to Crook, to break the hoodoo on the same line of track where it first got me. That's sensible, isn't it?"

"I don't know, Billy," murmured Lansing, dubious and noncommittal.

"Well, *I* know. Any man with good, red blood in his veins is a fool to lie down and let the hard luck trample all over him. I'm going up to see Trawl, and the old man has got to give me another chance. I'm entitled to it in my own right; and then there's the mother, up at Divide. Has Trawl forgotten the Rolling Stone, and the smash that took away the head of the family? Another chance is coming to me, and I'm going to plug for it, and plug hard."

"I wish you luck, Billy," said Lansing, "on my soul I do. There's some body else at Divide, isn't there?" and he winked as he said it.

A painful flush crept into the bronzed face opposite. Harding shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm not answering that flag, Lansing," said he. "Time enough for that when I show I'm a man and able to handle my own affairs without letting the hard luck take so many falls out of me. I'm in earnest about this," and his steel-gray eyes snapped through the wreaths of fragrant smoke. "I'll not ride the 'blind' nor the brake beams into Crook. I'm going, by James, like an honest fighter coming into his own. There's something you can do for me."

"What?" The operator flinched as though it might be a request for money; he could be free with a little tobacco, but cold cash was a different thing.

"I haven't a cent in my clothes," went on Harding, a bit dryly, for he was shrewd, and not slow to raise the other's smoke. "Send Trawl a message, and word it like this: 'William Horace Harding is here, and says that if I don't give him transportation to Crook he'll have to walk.' Shall I issue?' If you rush things I can go up on Nineteen," and Harding tossed a glance at the clock.

"I'll do that, sure," said Lansing; "but I'm sorry to say, Billy, I haven't much hope."

"Right here is where the luck begins to turn," declared Harding confidentially. "The old man can't look that 'William Horace' in the face without thinking right off of what two of the family have done for the Jerkwater Division. He'll come back with an O. K., you see. And then, again, this is the first time I've ever tackled this hoodoo proposition with both hands, same as now."

Harding smoked contentedly as he listened to the message as Lansing clicked it off. Then ensued a wait, while the hands of the clock drew near the time the fast express was due in Sweetbriar.

Orders came for an extra east to go onto the siding at Sweetbriar and wait for Nineteen. The extra arrived, and the conductor got his orders. As he

lingered a moment, his eyes appraised Harding rather ominously.

"What're you up to now, Hardluck?" he asked.

"Breaking the blockade," said Harding.

The conductor whistled. "Too big a job for one man," was his comment.

"We'll see about that," muttered the other grimly. Then came the message for which Harding was waiting:

Don't let William Horace walk.

Harding bounded out of his chair, and tossed his cap. "Didn't I tell you?" he cried triumphantly. "The old man *couldn't* turn me down. It's a good omen, Lansing, a mighty fine omen."

"I'm glad it happened this way, Billy," returned the operator, "even if it don't amount to anything in the long run."

He copied the message and handed it to Harding, then he went to his ticket case, pulled out the slip of pasteboard, stamped it, and pushed it into the other's hand.

Ten minutes later, when Nineteen rolled up to the station platform, Harding climbed aboard. In those fifty miles to Crook City he renewed old acquaintance with the train crew, and discussed his hopes. Fears he had none.

It was four-thirty when he climbed the stairs at division headquarters, and was ushered in to see Trawl. The division superintendent stared at him as at a ghost.

"I didn't know the walking was so good between Sweetbriar and Crook," he remarked. "How'd you make it, Hardluck?"

"Can't see the joke, Mr. Trawl," replied the puzzled Harding. "Lansing gave me transportation on your order."

"The deuce he did!" exclaimed Trawl. "Have you a copy of that message?"

Harding handed it over. Trawl stared and snickered.

"Well, I guess you win," he remarked. "The fool operators left out a semicolon after the word 'Don't.' I tried to be humorous, and you missed that little stroll of fifty miles. Now, tell me, what are you here for, anyhow?"

CHAPTER II.

BEATING DOWN THE BARRIER.

TRAWL was fond of a joke, even if it happened to be at his own expense. That little matter of the missing semicolon had put him in a good humor, so that the stars seemed to be grouping themselves auspiciously for Harding.

"Personally," said Harding, with a grin, "I never have any use for punctuation marks, and now I'm mighty glad somebody forgot that semicolon."

In spite of his apparent cheerfulness, and the realization that the moment had come for him to strike, and to strike hard, deep down in his soul there was a quivering sense of injustice and wrong. After all the Hardings had done and given for that line of road, Trawl would have turned down his request for a fifty-mile ride, and had intended to turn it down, with a heartless parody on the message from Sweetbriar.

But Trawl was a protégé and pet of the G. M.'s. He had been advanced to his post over the heads of others—men who may not have been more able, but who certainly were more deserving. By nature the superintendent was cold and calculating. He loved his authority, and it was much in evidence up and down the division; although, to give him his due, he tried to be just.

Still chuckling over the message, which he had laid on the desk in front of him where his eyes could easily fall on it from time to time, he took a cigar from his vest pocket and slowly snipped off the end with a contrivance that swung from his watch chain.

"It's on me, Harding," said Trawl. "And now you're here, and we're together, and there's something on your mind. You'll never have a better chance to get it out of your system.

"I want an engine, Mr. Trawl," said Harding respectfully.

"I suppose," and the superintendent slowly struck a match, "that you're not

particular whether it's a switch bumper in the yards or one of the new ten-wheelers on the fast-passenger run?"

"No," was the answer, while the wistful gray eyes searched the official's face, "I'm not particular. I've knocked around, tin-canned and double-crossed by my record on this division, until I'm tired of it. Either I'll get that private hoodoo of mine, or it will get me. I'm out to make good, or to run head on into something that will lay me out for keeps."

"And the Jerkwater Division is the instrument you have made up your mind to use?"

"Why not, Mr. Trawl? Here's where trouble first got crossways of my track, and here's where the line ought to be cleared."

"And very likely at the company's expense. I don't see it, Hardluck. If I remember, I was master mechanic when you were a sweeper in the roundhouse. Even then, my lad, you couldn't stub your toe without putting the company's foot in it to the tune of dollars and cents. We could never put a finger on you when it came to laying the blame, but, for all that, misfortune dogged your heels, and you were mighty expensive. When you got your job of wiping, Carter was the roundhouse boss. It was you, wasn't it, who ran the old Eighty-seven into the turntable pit?"

"That wasn't my fault, sir. I was told to come on with the Eighty-seven before the turntable was locked. Morris——"

"I'm not saying it was your fault, Hardluck," cut in Trawl, with a wave of his cigar, "but your misfortune. The road shouldered your misfortunes, then, but I'll be hanged if I can see why that should be the case now. After that affair with the Eighty-seven you learned to pound the key. You got so you could take and send with the best of them, and you were tried out on the night trick at Ransom. What happened there? You were off duty when you should have taken an order——"

"I was down the track punching a cowboy's head for shooting out my switch lights," broke in Harding, with spirit. "I was young then, and key pounding had made me limp and unsteady. And there happened to be two cowboys instead of one. When I came to myself the extra west was feeling its way through the Ransom yard, and the headlight of the up passenger was just showing around the bend. There was a close call, but I wasn't responsible."

"Close call!" repeated the superintendent, his hair rising with the thought of it. "Here at Crook everybody was having nervous prostration, and a call had been sent out for the wrecking crew. No, Harding, you weren't responsible; but it was just your devilish ill luck. Your uncle thought he could break the black spell that had settled down on you, and took you into the cab. He *did* do something, I'll admit that, and it looked as though you had got your jinx on the siding and had spiked the switch, when along came that trouble on the Piute, and——"

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Trawl!" cried Harding, white-faced and leaning forward, "you can't think I had anything to do with *that?* The track-walker had reported the bridge safe!"

"Billy," returned Trawl, not unkindly, "you had no more to do with what happened then than a babe in arms, but it was all a part of the trouble trail that followed you persistently all over this division. You were let out because the road was afraid to hang on to you any longer. Why can't you get into some other business? I have known men"—and here the superintendent looked thoughtfully at the burning tip of his cigar—"I have known men who were cursed with misfortune as railroaders, but who rose rapidly and successfully on the ranges and in the cities. Why don't you get into something else?"

"I've tried," said Harding bitterly. "What do you think I've been doing the past year? The reputation I've loaded up with on this road has hounded me, and everybody is afraid to give me a chance. Anyhow, I'd rather be a car tink on this jerkwater division than a captain of industry in a line that has nothing to do with rails and ties. I be-

long to a family of railroaders, Mr. Trawl, and with me it has got to be the railroad or nothing."

"I'm mighty sorry, Harding, and that's a fact," went on Trawl, after a period of thought, "but giving you an engine, or even a place in the cab, is out of the question. The trainmaster don't want you, the roadmaster wouldn't take you on a bet, the roundhouse boss would resign if we tried to put you there, and the dispatcher would probably throw a fit if I suggested that he give you a key."

"Is there anything wrong with—with my ability?" murmured Harding, his hopes slowly descending toward zero.

"Your ability is beyond dispute. It's merely that everybody on this division is afraid of you. But I don't want to be hard. The sacrifice your father made for the good of this company has not been forgotten. We don't consider that the small pension given your mother cancels that debt. We have a friendly feeling toward you, Billy, but it's a feeling that must be exercised with prudence. I want to think over your case. Will you be advised by me?"

"Certainly, sir," said Harding, grasping at the straw of hope.

"Then go up to Divide, and stay there until something turns up where I think we can take a chance on doing you a good turn. Grow a beard—why not?" and Trawl winked.

"Grow a beard?" repeated Harding, puzzled.

"That's the idea! I don't imagine you can change your appearance so your close friends will fail to recognize you, but I'll try to find something for you that will not bring you into personal contact with those who know you too well. When you get a tip from me, my boy, run down to the Junction. Mail me a letter from there, asking for a job, and sign that letter John Smith, or Tom Brown, or—or—well, anything but William Horace Harding. In that way, understand, I may be able to help you without setting this division by the ears."

Trawl's idea flashed over Harding suddenly. It rather nettled the young man to think that he had to go out of his character in order to secure a place on that road.

"It will be a joke on the fellows of the Jerkwater Division," pursued Trawl, his eyes crinkling with subdued mirth. "They've got it in for Hardluck Harding, and are afraid to work with him; but possibly we can put one over on them, Billy. We can try, anyhow," and the superintendent finished with a laugh.

"I'm not ashamed of the name, Mr. Trawl," said Harding, "and neither am I afraid to use it while bucking the line."

"I've yet to find the first man who thinks you're afraid of anything. But that isn't the point. In helping you, I've got to use strategy. Beats all how the fool notion that a man's a hoodoo and marked up for trouble will take hold of a lot of railroaders and play hob with their common sense. Go up and down this line, Harding, and you'll not find a man who'll admit being superstitious; but just scratch the veneer, and you'll find a black list filled with Fridays, cross-eyed women, red-headed men, nine and its multiples for locomotive numbers, black cats, and so on. It's mighty queer, but it's a fact. If you're bound to break the back of your particular hoodoo, we've got to go about it diplomatically."

"All right, sir," agreed Harding reluctantly. "I'm obliged to you for the suggestion. Can I get transportation up to Divide?"

"Is that the way you're fixed?" Trawl's hand groped for his pocket. "I couldn't take that message from Sweetbriar literally, you know."

"It should have been taken that way," said Harding, with a reddening face. "But I'll not have any money from you, sir. I'm not an object of charity yet, I hope. All I want is a chance to break this run of tough luck."

"I like your spirit, anyway," said Trawl, rising. "A dozen loads of steel are going over the mountain to-night, and I'll speak to Davy and see that he takes you as far as Divide in the way car. It may be a useless wish, my boy,

but all the same, and for the sake of your grit, I wish you luck."

Harding shook hands with the superintendent; and when he went downstairs and out of the building he was more hopeful of the future than he had been at any time for a year. Trawl might be a favorite with the Big Boss, but certainly he had shown the white side in his dealing with the unfortunate young railroader. He had been cautious, of course, and perhaps unnecessarily so. At that dismal period of his career, however, small favors were very gratefully received by Harding.

There was no doubt that the joke wrapped up in the super's message to Lansing had inclined the head of the division to receive the former employee of the road in an amiable and condescending spirit. And it was equally plain that his willingness to help Harding on was prompted, at least in part, by a spirit of fun and a desire to "put something over" on the rest of the division.

There was nothing funny about all this to Harding. He was hungry to get out on the main line and run regardless, meeting a sorry situation with all the energy and sincerity and courage that were in him. Trawl's "slow order" disappointed him, and the disposition to treat a crisis in a man's life as a jest saddened him. But the super had to be taken as he was, and, as stated before, Harding was not disposed to be critical.

But Davy! He wished he had been going up to Divide with any other man on the line.

So Chris Davy had got a freight run! Matters had not been standing still on the division during the past year.

Harding knew Davy as hostler at the roundhouse. Uncle Horace had always insisted on having his engine turned "with the sun." And this small eccentricity of one of the best drivers on the line had been hooted by Chris Davy. Uncle Horace trusted William to see to it always that the engine was turned in accordance with his desires. Davy had tried to turn it the other way, once, in spite of William's remonstrances, and, in the clash that resulted, the boss hostler was knocked into an ash pit and William had turned the engine himself. That was why William hated to ride with Chris Davy to Divide.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE EXTRA WEST.

EVER since the through line had acquired that hundred-and-fifty-mile stretch of privately owned road, a dozen years back, it had been pleasantly referred to as the Jerkwater Division. And for this there were at least two excellent reasons.

The miners and cattlemen who had conspired to build it, so that their ore might get to the smelters and their stock to the Eastern markets, had saved first cost at the expense of good engineering, and the results were dizzy grades and curves that would have given a boa constrictor the headache. At one end of the strictly local enterprise was the Junction, while the other end struggled as far as Jerkwater in the hills, and there, lacking the sinews of war, had given up the fight and elected to stay.

That first building was lost in the mists of antiquity, and only legends remained of mine owners forced to the wall and ranchers dropped into bankruptcy by an ill-considered venture. It takes money to build even a one-horse railroad in the rough country—more money than the combined resources of the section were able to command. And it was hard to borrow on such collateral. Shrewd financiers in the seats of capital saw nothing alluring in a contraption of rails and ties that began Somewhere and rambled aimlessly off into Nowhere. But the road was built, neither well nor wisely, time and place considered, and finally it had been absorbed by the trunk line in a way that was strictly legitimate but which left the stockholders small cause for congratulation.

The trunk line, it appeared, had had its eye on the proposition from the start, and had patiently waited like a designing hawk over a chicken yard. By extending westward to Burt's Gap,

a void was filled between the main road and a branch, capable of cutting several hours from a coast-to-coast schedule. And hours count in a government mail contract.

For years the construction department had been expending its energies on the first wild dream of the local enthusiasts. Curves were being straightened, tunnels bored, bridges flung across cañons, and kinks obliterated as much as possible by a prodigal expenditure of time and money. Some day, it was hoped and believed, the Jerkwater Division would absorb all the through business of the main line, instead of merely a part of it, as now. Meanwhile, the rebuilding went on, and the twelve loads of steel, behind which Harding was to travel to Divide, were being rushed to the engineers in charge of the work.

Extra West waited in the Crook City yards for the local passenger to come down the mountain. This happened at nine o'clock, and Extra West pulled out of Crook with a clear track to Divide.

There were two boxes back of the twelve flats of steel, and a pusher back of the waycar. The waycar was doing twelve miles an hour as Harding hopped aboard from the station platform. He walked inside and found Chris Davy, cheek by jowl with two other passengers in leather caps and reefer jackets, sitting on one of the side benches. The hind-end brakeman, second in command, was overhead somewhere.

Davy stared as at an apparition. One of the others exploded an oath, for which there seemed no cause whatever, and he and his companion turned their backs.

"Get out of here!" shouted Davy, starting to his feet and advancing with an agile set of the legs that kept him upright against the slew of the car.

"I'm going to Divide," returned Harding, surprised at this gratuitous display of ill nature, "and Trawl said I could ride with you. He told me he'd speak to you about it."

"Well, he didn't, and I'm not hungry for your company. I want to feel tolerably sure of getting over the mountain, and it's a cinch something will go crosswise if you're aboard. Get out of this doghouse peaceably, or I'll throw you out. I've troubles enough of my own without being loaded up with you."

As a boss hostler Davy was always crabbed and always sour. Getting a freight run had not tended to sweeten his temper. But the mere fact that Harding was in the waycar under instructions from Trawl, whether or not those instructions were known to Davy, was no warrant for his present mood.

"I'm going to ride to the top of the hill, Davy," returned Harding firmly, "because I was given the right by the superintendent. Maybe he forget to tell you—I don't know about that; but I do know that now I'm here I'm going to stay here till we get to Divide."

"You're going to get off," yelled the irate conductor, "that's what you're going to do!"

They were not doing over fifteen posts, and the switch lights in the Crook City yards were hardly lost in the gloom. Harding could have dropped off without much trouble and counted the ties back to division headquarters. A word to Trawl over the telephone would then have adjusted matters satisfactorily for a ride up the mountain on a way freight in the morning. But a principle was involved. Harding was entitled to passage on that extra, and he was going to have it.

There was a suspicion in his mind that Davy had received verbal instructions from the superintendent and was deliberately disregarding them. If this were really the case, then Trawl's respect for Harding would hardly increase if he allowed himself to be bully-ragged and forced off the extra. Of course, Davy would come in for a reprimand, in such a matter, but of the two Harding felt that he himself would be the heavier loser. His mounting spirit of defiance counseled him to stand his ground.

Chris Davy could not be called a drinking man, but Harding had always known that he would take a glass occasionally. So long as he did not indulge

to excess, or in a manner to interfere with his duties, the officials of the division had nothing to say. Just now it was evident that he had enough aboard to make his temper, if not his judgment, a bit unsteady.

Harding backed up against the cupola ladder in the middle of the car and waited for Davy to make the next move. The conductor came on, the fires of wrath kindling in his eyes.

"Keep your hands off me!" called Harding warningly.

Davy swore, and reached out to grab him. The other struck the clutching hands aside with a vigorous sweep of his right arm. The conductor uttered another imprecation, collected himself, and let drive with his right fist.

A lurch of the waycar, at the right moment, assisted by a deft dodge on the part of Harding, caused the fist to miss its target and smash against a rung of the ladder. A yell of pain was wrenched from Davy's lips, but the mishap merely made him the more savage.

"Here's where I even up with you for what happened two years ago at the roundhouse!" shouted Davy, and once more flung himself forward.

Harding's muscle and skill had not waned appreciably during the passing of the two years mentioned by Davy. The two men came together, and the conductor was beaten down by a stiff right-hander. As he tumbled, his head came in contact with the sharp edge of a locker. Half stunned, he rolled over upon the floor.

The two in the leather caps and reefer jackets had followed events with consuming interest. Their sympathies were plainly with the conductor, and they now hastened forward to give him their aid. One of them tore open the front of his jacket and reached toward his hip.

"Kill him, Dan!" barked Davy, sitting upon the floor and peering around dazedly.

Harding measured the chances, and concluded that discretion would be the better part of valor. He would have his ride up the mountain, but he need not associate with the three in the waycar. Whirling about, he swarmed up the ladder and out of the window to the roof, expecting every moment to have his feet tickled by a flying bullet. There was no shooting, however, which proved that Davy's companions had more sense than Davy himself. Harding hoped that the rear-end brakeman would intercede in his behalf and put an end to the difficulty. But the brakeman was not in evidence.

The extra, at that moment, was plunging through Cardigan, a little station at the foot of the big hill. The station lights flung a brief glare over the tops of the waycar and the boxes, and if the brakeman had been on the three cars Harding could not have failed to see him.

Harding looked back at the cupola. A leather cap and a pair of wide shoulders were emerging through the window.

All Harding desired was peace and a lift up the hard mountain wall to the little home at Divide. The extra was plunging on into the gloom again, the engines snorting and the drivers biting into the sanded rails as they labored on the grade. Harding jumped the gap to the top of the first box car, then watched while a dark figure came cautiously after him.

"Say, you!" Harding shouted. "Keep out of this. It's none of your affair, anyhow, and Davy will have to explain his foolishness to the superintendent."

If the man said anything in reply Harding did not hear it. The fellow kept coming on, and Harding retreated to the other end of the box and perched on the brake wheel.

The man kept his feet well as the train twisted around the ugly grades and rumbled over the trestles of its twenty-mile climb. If he was not a railroad man now, it seemed plain that he must have been one at some time or other in his career.

"You goin' to drop off?" he demanded, balancing himself on the toepath.

"Not on this part of the right of way," flung back Harding. "What do you take me for?"

Back of the first man another was coming. Harding could discern the second figure against the glow from the cupola, luridly backed by a stream of radiance as the fireman of the pusher opened his furnace door to feed the fires.

"I guess you'll drop, all right," said the first man, in a tone that left no doubt of his intentions.

A struggle on the top of that lurching box car would fall little short of madness. And why was this stranger, who was a passenger and should have been an innocent bystander, so rabidly coming to the aid of Chris Davy? Here was a mystery beyond Harding's power to solve. But Harding would retreat no farther. If he must fight for his passage, he would take his enemies one at a time.

He left the brake wheel, and three steps brought him directly in front of the man who was so strangely interested in getting him off the train. They grappled, were overset by a slew of the car, and fell with a crash on the roof. Then, had not Harding with one hand gripped the edge of the toe-path, they might have rolled to the edge and plunged to the rocks at the trackside.

"Hang on, Dan!" came huskily from the second figure, which was now coming over the last load. "I'll be with you in a brace of shakes, and, between us——"

It was Davy. His words came faintly above the screech of the flanges on the rails and the rattle of the train and the throb and pant of the engines.

But he was not the only one to put in a sudden appearance. From forward, swinging a lantern, bounded the rear-end brakeman, attracted by the novelty of a set-to on the top of the swaying car.

"Here, let up on that!" he cried, flashing his lantern in the faces of the two at handgrips. "What in Sam Hill —say, do you both want to get killed? Well, if it ain't Hardluck Harding!"

"Pitch him off, Joe!" clamored Davy. "He hasn't any right on this train. I ordered him to leave before we were clear of the Crook City yards, and he jumped me and bowled me over."

"Keep off, Chris!" ordered the brakeman. "Who's this bruiser that's mixing things up with Harding? What business has he got on the train? And, why in thunder——"

"He's a friend of mine," snapped Davy, "and he's here because he's trying to help me. Harding said the superintendent told him he could ride, but nothing was said to me. I haven't any use for that yap, anyhow."

"Confound it!" muttered the brakeman, whom Harding had known a long time. "The old man told me Hardluck was to ride with us to-night, and I was to tell you. But I forgot it."

"Told you, did he?" shouted Davy. "Well, who's bossing this freight? Why didn't he tell me?"

"You weren't around, I guess. Anyway, that's what Trawl said. If you hadn't been so blamed eager to get rid of him, I'd have dropped back and told you before we reached Divide."

This information, so late in being delivered, changed the status of affairs materially. Davy retreated a few steps, and Harding released his antagonist and carefully drew away. The man in the leather cap got up sullenly, muttering to himself.

"Well, he can ride, if that's the way of it," snorted Davy, "but he can't roost in the waycar. I've had more'n I can stand from him for one night. Come on, Dan."

The conductor retraced his way cautiously to the lookout, the other man following him. When they had disappeared the brakeman slumped to his knees and began digging something out from under the boards of the toe-path —an object wedged between the boards and the car roof.

"Here's something you dropped, Hardluck," said Joe, passing the object over.

"Half a sack of smoking" laughed Harding, carelessly dropping the object into his pocket. "Nice, hospitable outfit you've got on this extra to-night."

"Davy didn't want much of an excuse to rough things up with you. He'll

never forget what you done to him that time at the roundhouse. Blazes! He's a tough guy, anyhow; you ought to know that. Who's the lad that tackled you?"

"Never saw him before. Two passengers in the waycar, and this bruiser was one of them."

"Davy's carrying the two against orders, then. But that's his lookout. It's no great hardship for you to ride out here, I guess."

"It's a fine night and hot in the caboose—too hot!" and Harding laughed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TOBACCO BAG.

HARDING had been away from the Jerkwater Division for a year, but he had managed at least once a month to get back to Divide. The old mother was there, and William was all she had left. No matter how difficult it was for William to "breast the blows of circumstance," he never forgot or neglected his filial duties.

The women in the homes of railroad men, of men who run the trains, never know when they send their breadwinners forth whether they will ever come back. The little, gray lady at Divide had for years tried to shake off the forebodings that clustered about her husband, but she could not; and in the end his calling had taken him from her. That he had died a hero was something; yet that others should honor and revere his memory scarcely made her loss the less bitter.

Then her husband's brother had gone, and young William at the same time had come near going. To the woman, it seemed as though fate had bound the Hardings to a life that must ultimately spell destruction to the very last of the line. She had begged William to give up the road, and she had been secretly pleased when the division superintendent had asked him to seek employment elsewhere.

After that, Mrs. Harding had followed her son's career of misfortune with a troubled soul. Her keen intuition told her that he would come back to the railroad again—that the same fate which had forced him away would force him to return. So she was not surprised when he came home in the midnight hour and announced that he was to wait there for Trawl to find a place for him on the division; she was not surprised, but her heart was heavy.

That night William slept in his old room under the gable; and peace, and comfort, and hope filled him, and a great thankfulness that he should have such a port to come to in the hour of his troubles, and such a loyal friend as his mother to give him welcome.

The sun was high before he opened his eyes, and when he dressed and went downstairs he found the breakfast waiting. Old blue china was on the table, and a savory smell of bacon came from a covered skillet, and an odor of coffee from the old coffeepot. Outside the kitchen window were the morning-glories, and in the rocking-chair was his mother, reading a morning paper, and patiently waiting for him to come in his own good time.

"I'm a lazy hunks, eh, mother?" he asked, putting his arm around her and kissing her withered cheek.

"You were up late, Willie," she answered, "and I wanted you to have all the sleep you needed."

Oh, yes, he might be Bill to some of the boys on the division, plain William to others, and Hardluck to a few more, but to his mother he had been Willie from the time he wore short trousers, and to her he would probably be Willie to the end of the chapter.

"Gee, but it's good to be home!" he murmured, as he took his place at the table.

While they ate he told her of his determination to master his misfortunes in the same place where they had first overtaken him, of how he had slipped up from Sweetbriar to Crook on a semicolon, so to speak, had secured a promise from Trawl, and had reached Divide on the Extra West. He did not tell her of the trouble on the extra—that was beside the matter, and would only have caused her worry—but he did mention what Trawl had said about

growing a beard, going down to the Junction, and applying for work under a fictitious name.

"No!" cried Mrs. Harding sharply. "Does the superintendent think your own name is something to be ashamed of, Willie?"

He explained, as well as he could, Trawl's reason for making the suggestion.

"I can't think that the superintendent is right," his mother went on, "and that your old friends will refuse to work with you because you are William Horace Harding. You will not do this with my consent, Willie. I don't believe in false names—they mean deceit—and if you are to win in your fight, I'm sure that is a bad way to begin."

"That's what I think, mother; but——"

"Then," she cut in eagerly, "don't do something which you know is not square and aboveboard. When you hear from Mr. Trawl, write him and tell him that you will take a place under your own name, or not at all."

"That might set him against the whole scheme."

"Then let it. Matters have come to a pretty pass, *I* think, if all the Hardings have done for this road has not earned you a chance in your own right. We'll get along, Willie, until matters change for you. It is a long lane, you know, that has no turning."

"Mother," he cried, "you're a brick! I'll fight it out on that line," he added, with a boyish laugh, "if it takes all summer."

She smiled at him bravely and sympathetically.

"Go out on the porch and read, son," said she, handing him the paper. "There was a robbery at Crook last evening, and maybe the account of it will interest you. As soon as the breakfast work is done I'll come."

He took the paper, went to the front of the house, sat down in a comfortable chair, and put his feet on the porch railing. A white house, farther down the street, drew his attention for some time. At last, with a faint smile, he gave up his staring and read about the robbery.

In the early evening of the preceding day, at eight or eight-thirty, a man named Jonas Prebble, a miner, had been murderously assaulted and robbed. Prebble was the owner of a little five-stamp mill, and he had come to town during the day with a bar of bullion. He had had the bar assayed, and the bank had figured the value of the bar from the assayer's certificate, and advanced five hundred dollars.

This was the usual proceeding in deals of that character where miners were in need of ready money. The bank, assuming charge of the bullion after making the advance, forwarded it to a San Francisco smelting and refining company, received a check in settlement, and then paid over to the miner whatever balance might be due him.

Prebble, his five hundred dollars in his pocket, had been watched and waylaid within a stone's throw of Crook City's main street. Badly beaten up and stripped of his possessions, he had been found and taken to the railroad company's hospital. He had revived and told what he knew of the robbers.

There were two of the scoundrels, but they had sprung upon him so suddenly that he could give absolutely no description of them. He had been struck down, and remembered nothing more until regaining his wits in the hospital. The police, the paper stated, had absolutely no clew to work on, and it was doubtful whether the robbers would ever be apprehended or the stolen money recovered.

"I'm not the only fellow that's playing in hard luck," thought Harding, as he tossed the paper aside and reached into a pocket for his pipe. "We're never so bad off in this world, I guess, but what we can look around and see some one else who is worse off. Now I guess——"

He had his pipe, and was fishing in his coat for the half bag of smoking" given to him by Lansing. When he drew out the tobacco sack, he saw that it was yellow, while the one contributed by the agent at Sweetbriar had been a

dingy white. This wasn't the same bag, that was evident.

Then Harding recalled the "find" made by the rear-end brakeman on top of the box car. In the dim glow of the lantern Harding had paid but scant attention to the object Joe had handed him. He had thought, very naturally, that Lansing's half bag of tobacco had fallen from his pocket during his struggle with the man in the leather cap, and had become wedged between the toe-path and the top of the car. So far as the "feel" of the bag to Harding's fingers was concerned, it had seemed the same.

Yet now, examining the object by broad daylight, he could see clearly that the sack was not the one given to him by Lansing. Indeed, after a brief search, he found the small package which he had brought from Sweetbriar. He placed the two bags on his knee and surveyed them critically. The contents of the yellow sack were bulkier than the tobacco in the white one. What the brakeman had found had plainly not been lost by Harding at all, but by the fellow who had followed him from the cupola of the waycar.

In some excitement, Harding loosened the string of the yellow sack, dug into it with his fingers, and brought out —a compact roll of bank notes! He gasped with astonishment, and the next moment eased his feelings with a low whistle.

"Queer sort of a pocketbook!" he muttered. "I guess that guy in the leather cap is sorry, about now, that he tried to help Davy pitch me off the train. Didn't the fellow discover his loss before I dropped off at Divide? If he did, why didn't he come looking for the money?"

But Harding reasoned that the man, if he had learned of his loss, must have supposed that the bag with the money had fallen into the right of way at about the spot where the set-to occurred, and to go hunting for so small an object as a tobacco sack among the rocks would have been worse than looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Harding removed a rubber band from the tight roll, and spread out the bills. On top of them, and in such a position that it had been concealed by the bank notes when rolled, lay an oblong, crumpled slip of paper.

It was a memorandum of gold bullion deposited with the Crook City bank; weight, gold, 49.02 ounces; fineness in one-thousandths, 709½; value, $718.37; silver, fineness in one-thousandths, 196; value, $5.14; charges, $3.03. Net value, $720.48. And the certificate was issued in the name of Jonas Prebble!

CHAPTER V.

MEETING FORTUNE HALFWAY.

HARDING was dumfounded. Luck seemed to be going out of its way to shake hands with him. The course of events had spurned probability in a way that was well-nigh incredible.

That the man in the leather cap should have dropped the yellow tobacco bag out of his pocket was not to be wondered at; it was the series of circumstances immediately following the loss of the bag that stamped the whole proceeding as remarkable.

For that bag the line of least resistance was over the top of the swaying box car and into the right of way. Not more than once in a thousand times would it have become wedged under the boards of the toe-path.

By an equally startling blunder of chance, the rear-end brakeman had found it and had offered it to Harding; and Harding, in the gloom and with nerves still athrill with excitement, had discovered no difference between the bag and the one given him by Lansing and had readily appropriated it.

Harding laughed softly to himself as he sat on the porch and turned these incidents over in his mind. And then his face straightened soberly as the more serious aspects of the affair slowly dawned on him.

The two scoundrels in the leather caps had robbed the miner! Why was Chris Davy helping them away from the scene of the holdup? On his own responsibility the freight conductor had

given them a lift up the mountain and out of the toils of the law!

Had Davy known what those two strong-arm lads had done? Harding recalled the unpleasant surprise manifested by the men when he had entered the waycar. They were fugitives from justice, and naturally suspicious of strangers; and possibly Davy's friendship for the rascally pair was his real reason for wanting to get rid of Harding.

"This looks pretty black for Davy!" muttered Harding, rolling up the memorandum and the bank notes, snapping the rubber around them, dropped the roll into the bay, and the bag back into his pocket. "Question is: What am I to do with this money? I've got to get it into the hands of its rightful owner, of course; but that's only part of the job. If there's a chance, somehow, to bag those two footpads, then it can't be allowed to pass. I'm positive Davy knows more about this black business than he'd care to have anybody even guess. Could those holdup chaps be spotted by keeping an eye on Chris?"

Harding was impressed by this sudden turn of events. He felt as though Fortune had changed her tactics, was now moving in his direction and inviting him to meet her halfway. So far as pecuniary gain was concerned, there would be none in the affair for Harding. What interested him was the significant fact that he was being favored by chance. He believed it a good omen in the fight he was making to come into his own on that Jerkwater Division.

"Why, William! When in the world did you get home?"

A soft voice, filled with surprise, floated toward Harding from the porch rail. He turned quickly in his chair, his face flushed with pleasure. A girl was leaning over the rail and peering at him from the shadowy depths of a sunbonnet.

"Milly!" he exclaimed. "I've been watching for you, and——"

"How can you expect me to believe that?" she broke in laughingly. "I came along the walk directly from our house, but your head was down and you never once looked up. Watching, eh? Why, I'm sure you weren't even thinking of me, William! There was something else on your mind."

"Well, there's nothing else on my mind now!" With that, his arms went out over the rail and caught her. "Right here is where I prove it," he added.

She struggled, or pretended to struggle. The sunbonnet fell back upon her shoulders, revealing a pretty face, a pair of dancing, brown eyes, and two roguish, tempting lips. Those lips paid tribute to the impetuous William, and no grudging tribute, either.

"Now, Miss Kent," said William, straightening erect, "if you'll just come up on the porch and sit down, we'll have a bit of a talk. I'll tell you what Hardluck has been doing, and what he intends to do. You see," he finished, "I'm going to change that name before I give you a chance to change yours."

"Is there much of a chance?" she queried archly, springing lightly up the steps.

"Watch my smoke, Milly!" he answered. "I've taken the bit in my teeth, and I'm going to convince everybody on this line of track that luck has hooked arms with me and is going to be my side partner from now on."

A pleased look crossed Milly's face.

"That's the way I like to hear you talk, William," said she. "Every man ought to be bigger than his troubles. When you left the road, you know, I thought it looked like a stampede. It wasn't like you to show a white feather on the firing line."

"Trawl was back of the stampede. You remember, Milly, he said I was too big a load for the division to carry, and that he was obliged to dispense with my valuable services. Calamity has been dogging my footsteps, and I've just awoke to the fact that maybe Fortune, like a certain young lady not a thousand miles from me this minute, had no use for a quitter. So, in spite of the division superintendent, I came back. Had a talk with him yesterday afternoon."

"Don't think for an instant, William Horace, that I ever thought you were a quitter!" declared the girl, with a toss

of the head and a glance of confidence and pride into his face. "You're a long way from being that. But, tell me, what did Mr. Trawl say?"

He told her briefly.

"The boys on this division afraid to work with you?" Milly echoed, her upper lip curling. "Let him tell that to the marines! And, William"—here she lifted a forefinger admonishingly—"if you ever try to grow a beard and get work on the division under a false name, I'll never speak to you again! The idea! You're not a skulker, and that name of yours is one to be proud of."

"Just what I was telling him, Milly," came the voice of Mrs. Harding from the open door. "I'm glad you feel about that as I do. If Mr. Trawl can't give William a chance under his own name, then he doesn't want the chance."

"Let him make a chance for himself," answered Milly. "He wouldn't be a Harding if he couldn't do that."

"I've made up my mind to stick to my colors," said Harding. "I can't wait in Divide to hear from Trawl, so I'm going down to division headquarters tonight and demand my rights."

A shadow of disappointment crossed his mother's face. "Better stay here for a week or two, Willie," urged Mrs. Harding. "You look worn and tired, and the rest will do you a world of good."

"I know I could have a fine time here, mother, but I feel as though I'd be loafing on the job. I've got a notion that the iron is hot, and that now is the time to strike."

"I'm afraid Mr. Trawl won't listen to you, now. He has given advice, and you're not taking it. He's a man, I think, who likes to have his way. I can't imagine how he'd be so cruel hard on one of our family. Did you tell Milly about that message he sent to Sweetbriar?"

Telling his mother about that message was one thing, but repeating it to Milly, with all the attending circumstances, was quite another. Harding's pride balked at letting the girl know the extremity to which he had been reduced. Now that the message had been mentioned, however, he had to tell about it.

The fine eyes of the girl filled with sympathy, and then with indignation. She did not laugh. Like Mrs. Harding she could see nothing humorous in what Trawl was pleased to call a joke.

"What your father and your uncle have done for this road, William," said Milly warmly, "ought to entitle you to an annual pass over every part of it. And Trawl could refuse you a ride from Sweetbriar to Crook City! I'd just like to tell him what I think about that! I've a notion to go down to headquarters and talk with him. Dad's on the fast express run to-night, and I know he'd let me ride with him on the engine."

"That wouldn't do, Milly," protested Harding; "never in the world. I'll fight my own battles, little girl."

Anson Kent, Milly's father, was one of the best engineers on the division. He had been on the left side of the cab at Rolling Stone, and it was William's father who had flung him from the gangway to safety.

"I guess you're right about that, William," said Milly. "There's one man on this road that's not afraid to work with you, and that's dad. Tell Trawl to give you a place in the cab with him."

"I want an engine," answered Harding, "and before I'm done with Trawl he's going to see that I have one."

"He can't help himself," the girl returned, "if you go into this fight with that kind of a spirit. I wish there was something I could do to help you."

"You're the biggest kind of a help to me, just as it is," asserted Harding. "You and mother are my backers," he added, laughing, "and I've got to make good just to show you what I can do."

He did not tell them of the "find" he had recently made in the yellow tobacco bag. He hesitated to let them know about Davy's hostility, for he was sure it would fill them with needless worries; and he couldn't tell about Prebble's money without bringing the venomous freight conductor into the narrative.

The fast mail and express went roaring down the mountain at two in the morning. If Anson Kent had that run, then Harding knew he was sure of a ride back to Crook City.

That was a day of rest and comfort for Harding. The quiet little house filled him with a spirit of cheer and confidence. In the parlor he stood before the enlarged crayon portrait of his father, and the steady gray eyes of the picture looked into his and seemed to impart a message of hope and an admonition to be strong.

Late in the afternoon William and his mother paid a visit to the little cemetery back of the town. A granite block had been placed on the Harding lot by the railroad company, and the inscription on the stone at the head of William Harding's grave told how the dead engineer had given his life for his passengers at the Rolling Stone.

Side by side with the elder William, lay Horace. The company had honored him with another headstone and with an inscription telling of his courage and loyalty and of the company's gratitude.

Leaning on the arm of her stalwart son, Mrs. Harding wept and scattered the flowers she had brought. Many times William had visited that hallowed spot, but never before had he felt as he did then.

Out of the past came influences that nerved and strengthened him for the battles ahead. He felt, in every tingling fiber of his body, the power to take his fate in his two hands and make of it what he would.

After his mother had gone to bed, William sat long on the porch. The local passenger had come over the rim of the mountain and gone screaming down into the shadows, and, an hour or two afterward, Harding got up from his chair and strolled down the street to the railroad station. O'Grady was the night man, and Harding knew him well. He would gossip a while with O'Grady, and so beguile the time while waiting for the fast mail and express to arrive.

CHAPTER VI.

A MOVE THAT FAILED.

HARDING'S plans for the night involved a ride to Crook City and a talk with the county sheriff in that town. The sheriff's name was Fordney, and Harding was well acquainted with him. He could turn over the money and the bullion receipt to Fordney, explain how they had come into his hands, and then leave the machinery of the law to work out the ultimate solution. If Chris Davy happened to be caught in the web, it would mean nothing to Harding one way or the other.

The station lights threw but a feeble glow over the spot where Harding climbed to the platform. He stumbled over something at the edge of the planks, and found it to be a velocipede car. The speeder had been taken from the tracks, and carelessly left where some railroad man stood a very good chance of tripping over it and doing himself an injury. Harding pushed the speeder to the other side of the platform and went into the station building.

O'Grady, a wizened little chap who had been three years on the night trick at Divide, was humped over his table, taking an order from the dispatcher. O'Grady was forty-three, and a bachelor. Some said that a certain maiden lady in Divide was the secret reason for O'Grady's sticking so long to that particular post and turning his back on better places and more pay. But that was O'Grady's business, and no one had the hardihood to take him to task for it.

Harding entered the operator's room and quietly took a chair. The dispatcher was telling O'Grady that there were no orders for Extra East, No. 56, Conductor Davy. The extra had a clear track to Crook City and would go through Divide without stop. All O'Grady had to do was to pull in his stop signal and report the freight out when it passed his window.

He cast a glance at the clock, manipulated his signal lever, and then whirled around in his chair. The presence of Harding seemed to surprise him.

"Billy, if it ain't!" he exclaimed. "Was it you got off the extra last night?"

"I was the fellow, Larry," Harding answered. "It was late, and I made tracks for home."

"Faith, lad, and I'm glad to see you." O'Grady chuckled. "It's all over the division how you slipped up to Crook from Sweetbriar on a punctuation point that the Morse didn't take care of. Very humorous. How's the luck?"

"You ought to know by that, Larry, that the luck's changing."

"Sure, I never thought of it in that light; but I guess you might call it taking a fall out of luck with a stuffed club. I suppose you ain't particular how it changes, just so it really changes, eh?"

"Any turn would be for the better."

"Begorry, that's right. It's about time calamity quit doggin' your heels. You've had more than your share of it, boy. It's queer, though, how some railroaders are born with the trouble sign and never get over it. Away back in the early days, there was Ortie McGraw, one of the best hands with an engine you'd ever find in a month's travel. Hard luck hounded him from pillar to post. Niver a bit of blame could ye lay on him for any of the cussedness that came his way; but it was his fate to be always in the limelight when the jinx got busy. The company hung on to him, and only got ready to let him go when the rest of trainmen threatened to strike if he wasn't ditched. Poor divil! His engine went head on into a stock train on a misreading of orders, and he was dead when they got him out of the smash. He had got his discharge, you see, before the company had a chance to hand it to him."

"Don't you think it's in a man to live down such a hard run of luck?" inquired Harding quietly.

"It's in you, lad, if it's in anybody; but"—and O'Grady shook his head ominously—"it's far and away too deep a subject for a mere night man to discuss."

There came, at that moment, a distant rattle of the rails, and the operator leaned over his table to get a look along the track.

"Here's the extra now," said he, "and she'll go through here like a singed cat. Davy's going down to Crook after more iron for the construction gang."

He began calling the dispatcher to report, and Harding, heeding a sudden impulse, left the station and got out on the platform. Why did he go? Why did he lean back in the shadows as the empty flats sailed past and bend keen eyes on the lighted waycar? He could have given no logical reason for this move. He simply had a curiosity to watch Davy's waycar as it flung past.

A man was standing on the rear platform in the crimson glow of the tail lights. Behind him, the white of the oil lamps threw his form into bold relief. Harding had a good look at the fellow, although a fleeting one, and he was not Davy. He was a man in a leather cap and a reefer jacket—the one Davy had referred to as Dan.

Harding gave a start, and then he stood staring until the tail lights vanished and the rush and roar of the freight died away in his ears. What sort of a continuous engagement was that man in the leather cap playing with Chris Davy? Why was the conductor, dead against orders, hauling the fellow up and down the division?

As soon as Harding could get a grip on his faculties, he bolted into the operator's room. Grabbing a pad of telegraph blanks from a shelf, he began writing a message.

"What's the matter with you, Billy?" queried the night man. "You look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

"Never mind about that, Larry," answered Harding, shoving the telegram at him. "Get that on the wires as soon as the Old Harry will let you, and rush it collect."

O'Grady took the telegram, stared at it, and gave vent to a low whistle. "Distinctly hostile, or I'm a Fenian. For the love of Mike, Billy, what's doing?"

"You'll know all about it later—I can't tell you anything now."

O'Grady had to bottle up his curiosity, although it required an effort, and once more dropped a hand on the key and began pounding the call for Crook City. Then, having secured the operator, he clicked off the following:

JAMES FORDNEY, Sheriff, Crook City: Meet Extra Freight, No. 56, eastbound, well up Crook City yards. Arrest man in leather cap, reefer jacket, answering to name of Dan. He's one of the two who held up Jonas Prebble. Will be with you in the morning and prove case against him.

WILLIAM HORACE HARDING.

Having finished with the message, O'Grady leaned back in his chair and stared hard at William Horace Harding. "Gone into the gumshoe business, Billy?" he inquired.

"No," answered Harding, and grinned; "it's only the way the luck is breaking. I ought to have an answer to that in an hour or two—after Fordney gets his man."

"When are you going down?"

"I was thinking of going with Kent. Milly told me he takes the fast mail and express into Crook to-night."

"I was reading about that holdup," pursued O'Grady. "It happened last night, and you have been here in Divide all day. How in the fiend's name do you happen to know who bowled Prebble over? Was you expecting him to pass in the caboose of the Extra East? Is that why you went out to watch?"

"I wasn't expecting a thing," maintained Harding stoutly, "and I can't tell you why I went out to watch. It's the luck, I'm telling you, Larry. It has turned squarely around, and is coming my way. Fortune has grabbed me by the elbow, and whichever way I'm pulled, that's the why I go."

"You've got 'em, I guess, me boy," muttered the night man, wagging his head. "Twenty-eight, this night, is a real treasure train. There's one shipment alone of sixty thousand in bullion coming from Herkimer and the mines there. The clean-up was a few days ago, and Kent never hauled so much treasure as he's doing this run. Billy, don't ride with him! If ye do, lad, something might happen!"

"So you've got a little of that foolishness tucked away under your own hide, have you?" queried Harding grimly. "Maybe you think Kent won't let me ride with him?"

"Sure, he'll let you—there are family reasons, Billy," and O'Grady winked; "but is it right to lay him open to trouble by hoodooing his run?"

"Look here," returned Harding, with a sudden thought, "why can't I go down the mountain on that speeder out on the platform? Who uses it?"

"The section boss takes the speeder out, now and then. He used it this evening, but he may not be using it again for a month."

"May I take it?"

"Better ride with Kent and hoodoo him; if you don't, more than likely you'll be afther hoodooing yourself. Say, Billy, I wouldn't go over those ugly curves and trestles on that thing, in a night as black as this, for all the money on Twenty-eight. That's right."

"May I take the speeder?"

"Why, if ye insist on breaking your neck, sorry a bit will I stand in your way. But you're crowding your luck too far. You'll have the side of the hill to yourself for several hours, if that's any satisfaction to you."

"I've got to get to Crook as soon as possible. If it wasn't for waiting to hear from Fordney, I'd start now."

Harding lighted his pipe and impatiently walked the floor. The hands of the clock touched eleven, and then eleven-thirty, before Crook City called Divide. Then Harding listened while this came over the wire:

Met Extra East, but man described wasn't in the waycar. Possibly jumped before train reached the yard. Wire information quick. Conductor Davy knows nothing about him.

This was signed by Fordney. Harding was at once thrown into a quandary.

"Your eyes played you false, Billy," hazarded O'Grady. "You only thought you saw the man in the leather cap and reefer jacket."

"I'll take my oath he was standing on the rear platform of the waycar!" declared Harding emphatically.

"But Davy says——"

"No matter what Davy says, I know I'm right."

"Say, but ye're hot on the trail, anyhow. What answer are you going to send Fordney?"

"Wire him that I'm coming with the explanation—that it's too long for the wire, and too complicated. Just so he'll know I'm not fooling with him, say that when I come I'll bring Prebble's money. And, Larry," added Harding earnestly, "keep all this to yourself, mind. It's Western Union business, and the railroad has nothing to do with it."

"Sure, I'll keep it under my hat, Billy," sighed O'Grady, "but you've got me going, for fair. Before I send the message I'll just help you get the speeder on the rails. And I'll loan ye a lantern. It's a poor light for those twenty twisting miles, but maybe it'll help you to save your fool neck. Just a minute, lad."

The night man took a spare lantern down from a hook, shook it to make sure there was oil in it, then lifted the globe and touched a match to the wick. After that, he led the way to the platform.

"Now to get ye started, Billy," he said ominously, "and if trouble comes of this foolishness, don't never say ye wasn't warned beforehand."

The velocipede was pushed across the planks and straightened on the rails. Harding bound the lantern to the front of the little car with a piece of rope, then settled himself in the seat, feet and hands on the propelling levers. O'Grady gave him a push, shouted a lusty "Good-by and good luck!"—and Harding was off.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MISSING NIGHT MAN.

BLACK clouds were rolling across the sky, and a wind that smelled of rain sprang up as Harding started down the mountainside. The wind was from the northwest, and it blew him along and increased his difficulties.

The grades were steep, and the little speeder needed a curb, rather than a spur, every foot of the way. With the gale at his back, Harding exerted his strength against the jumping levers. Hard work had strengthened his muscles, but they buckled under the fierce strain he imposed on them.

The question that early presented itself to him was this: Could he hold out until he reached the foot of that twisting twenty-mile grade? There was but one answer to that question: He *must* hold out, for if the speeder got beyond his control, it would leave the rails and either maim or kill him.

Before he had dropped two miles down that treacherous descent, the whipping wind had snuffed out his lantern. By then the night was so black he could scarcely see the thrashing levers in front of him. He was bowling onward at terrific speed, grinding around curves and darting over trestles, flinging madly onward into depths it was impossible to see.

To loosen his feet from the stirrups, or his fingers from the handle bars, meant that the levers could never be recovered. Under the momentum of the car the levers were jumping back and forth in a frenzy almost demoniacal. He fought with them, gritting his teeth and calling upon the last ounce of his strength. The battle, time and again, fairly lifted him from the seat, threatening to hurl him at the trackside while the car itself charged wildly on.

Then the rain came, driving down on him in a flood. His hat was torn from his head, the wet hair tumbled about his eyes, and he was drenched through and through; but still the levers tore at him as though seeking to batter him, cripple him, and toss him to his doom on the rocks of the right of way.

Lightning zigzagged out of the inky clouds. In the glare he might have taken some account of his desperate situation had the rain not blinded him. As it was, he was conscious of no more than a dull gleam through the curtain of water. The ripping roar of the thunder seemed to shake the whole mountain.

Never before had his endurance been tried as it was then. He held to his

work because his life depended on it, and if he had one thought apart from his task of checking the car's speed it was a curse upon his heedlessness for not waiting at Divide for a ride with Kent.

But, as Harding had told O'Grady, Fortune had him by the elbow, and he was doing her will. Impulse had mastered him, and he had pinned his faith to impulse as the urging of destiny.

His brain grew fagged, and he dropped into a half trance from which he roused, now and again, to find his hands and feet keeping up the struggle against the momentum of the speeder. Self-preservation persisted in holding him to that trying ordeal, even when his faculties failed him.

To guess at the passing time was beyond him. Hours may have passed, or only minutes; he could not tell. He was conscious only of those beating levers, and of the necessity of keeping up the fight.

At last the jumping fiends in front of him lost their energy. He realized that they were battling with less and less vigor against his aching muscles. Tired as he was, he mastered them. The speeder stopped, and he drooped sideways from the seat and fell sprawling beside the rails. After that, his mind plunged into total darkness.

How long he was unconscious was a point which did not interest him. Reason returned, and that was enough. He sat up in the gravel and discovered that the rain had ceased, that station lights and the red eyes of switch lamps were in front of him, and that he was still alive.

Aching and bruised and soaking wet, he managed to regain his feet. With a trembling hand he wiped the sweat from his eyes and stared through the dark toward the station. He knew, then, that, beyond all doubt, he had negotiated the mountainside in safety and had reached Cardigan.

With a final mustering of his strength he hauled the speeder from the track and stumbled to the station platform, and along it to the door of the waiting room. Staggering into the station, he made his way mechanically to the cubby-hole given over to the operator. But there was no operator in sight.

A chair in front of the operator's table was overturned, an iron letter press had been knocked from its stand and lay under the ticket case, and there was a scattering of papers about the floor. Harding set the chair upright and dropped into it.

His jaded wits were asking what all this could mean? Where was the night man at Cardigan? What had happened in that room?

Oppressed somehow with a feeling of calamity, Harding's eyes wandered vacantly here and there. A clip on the table held a print of bloody fingers. He picked it up, stared at the red marks, and the omen of calamity was lost in a sensation of panic.

There had been foul play in that room! But who had been the cause of it? And what was the motive?

Excitement brought fresh strength to Harding's faltering limbs. He looked around the place for the night man; he called to him, but all without result. The man on the night trick at Cardigan was mysteriously, tragically missing!

There was nothing at Cardigan but the station, a water tank, a store, and a boarding house. It was at the foot of the big grade, however, and was so important as an order point that a night man was a necessity.

Harding, racking his brain for some solution of the mystery, leaned against the table. Then he became aware that the key was steadily snapping the call "Cn, Cn, Cn." It was the dispatcher calling Cardigan. How long that call had been echoing, unanswered, through the operator's room, Harding did not know; but his fingers jumped to the key, and he slumped into the chair. "I, I, Cn," he rapped out.

The dispatcher had been calling for fifteen minutes and wanted to know where the deuce he had been. Harding, with the beautiful, flowing Morse he always used—Morse whose brilliancy racked limbs and tired muscles could not dim—explained that the regular night man was missing.

"No need to tell me that," said the dispatcher, "from your sending I know you're neither Higgins, the night man, nor Blake, of the day trick. Who are you?"

And then, very calmly, and with a touch of pride, the weary but determined job hunter spelled it out—"William Horace Harding." Then the sounder stuttered, symbolizing a gasp of astonishment—perhaps of consternation—by the man in charge of the train sheet.

"How you got there, or what's happened to Higgins, will have to wait," said the instrument. "Cloudburst and washout at Hesperus, and engine and two cars of fast freight in the ditch. Wrecking outfit just leaving here for over the mountain. Number Twenty-eight left Divide two-fifteen. Hold and back into the clear for Wreck Extra."

"S. D." reported Harding, meaning that a stop signal was displayed to catch Twenty-eight with fresh orders. Then he added, "Signal displayed ever since I got here."

"That's queer," came from the man at the other end of the wire; "Higgins had no orders to hold Twenty-eight. If Twenty-eight isn't in sight, run over to boarding house and get Blake on the job."

There it was! The same old distrust of Hardluck Harding was cropping out. Perhaps it was only natural that the dispatcher should want a regular employee of the road on the job instead of a chance outsider. Harding was worn and tired, and an easy prey to bitterness. He had little time to consider the matter, and left the key to hurry out on the station platform.

A hill to the west hid trains approaching from that direction until they were close upon the Cardigan station. That hill should have been leveled, and the scheme of improvements now inaugurated over the division embraced its cutting away, but the engineers had not yet got around to it. Harding could neither see nor hear anything of Twenty-eight, and he dashed across the three hundred yards of open to the boarding house.

His loud summons was answered by a head from an upper window. Blake wasn't at home. He had gone to a dance at a ranch, miles away in the hills, and wouldn't be back till morning. Harding laughed grimly as he turned back.

"It's up to me to find Higgins," he thought, "and if I can't find him in time it's up to me to lay out the fast mail and express and give the wreckers a clear track through Cardigan."

He reasoned swiftly as to what had happened. The fast freight that had gone into the ditch at Hesperus, followed Twenty-eight, the fast mail and express. Hesperus lay to the west of the mountain about as Cardigan lay to the east.

News of the washout had not reached Crook City in time to catch Twenty-eight with a change of orders at Divide, and usually Twenty-eight went through Cardigan like greased lightning. The wreckers had been started from division headquarters with orders to run regardless of other trains clear to their destination, the dispatcher figuring on getting instructions to Cardigan well ahead of the wreckers and in time to get Twenty-eight on the siding.

Usually on such a night as that had been, the wrecking crew slept in a waycar at the tail of a derrick, with an engine under steam and ready for any call. Something was always bound to go wrong on that Jerkwater Division, if given half a chance.

As Harding hit the station platform on his return to the operator's room, he stopped short. The stop signal had been taken in!

Now what the blazes could that mean? Who had been interfering with a signal that meant so much to lives and property as that one? With an angry exclamation, he started along the platform at a run, only to bump into some one who staggered across his path.

"Who are you?" demanded Harding, drawing back to peer at the form that stood swaying before him.

"Help! I want help!" came an answer, in a choking voice.

"Who are you?" shouted Harding again.

"Higgins," was the gasping response, "Higgins, the night man. And I—I'm all shot up. Just came to my senses and crawled out of the baggage room."

"Did you take in that stop signal?"

"Yes! I——"

Harding would have rushed on, for away off in the direction of Crook City he caught the faint gleam of a headlight. The wreckers were coming, and it was a certainty that Twenty-eight was even closer at hand.

But Harding did not go far. Higgins flung out his arms and grabbed him desperately.

"Wait!" mumbled the night man; "you don't understand. Two men jumped me in the ticket office. One hit me with the ticket stamp and the other put a bullet through my shoulder. I went down, but I kept my wits for a few minutes. I heard 'em talk. They're planning to stop Twenty-eight with the signal and hold up the express messenger. There's treasure on the fast train to-night——"

Harding was astounded. It was the holdup men who had set the stop signal, after murderously assaulting Higgins and throwing him, badly wounded, into the baggage room. Higgins, reviving, knew of that, but did not know of the washout, the Wreck Extra, or the fresh orders for Twenty-eight—and he had changed the signal, in order to foil the would-be robbers, and thereby thrown Twenty-eight against the wreckers!

Harding, at that moment, became conscious of a muffled rattle and roar behind him; and he whirled to see the gleam of Twenty-eight's headlight around the hill!

CHAPTER VIII.

MEETING AN EMERGENCY.

WITH Twenty-eight and the wrecking outfit, each crew with the right of way, rushing together on the single track, and no chance to change the signal so it could be read and heeded in time, there seemed little to do but get out of the way and wait for the trains to meet head on.

As between a holdup and a wreck with loss of life, Harding would not have hesitated a moment. The matter, however, had passed that phase. What could be done, if anything, to keep the Cardigan yard from being piled with wreck and ruin? This was what concerned Harding.

To one point the events of the past night and day, and part of another night seemed to have been urging him. Fortune, one might think, was giving him her one supreme dare. By devious ways she had brought him to Cardigan and hedged him around with unusual circumstances. It was possible that Harding's whole future might hinge on the way he conducted himself during the next sixty seconds.

Was this to be his Austerlitz or his Waterloo? Was he to let the crisis pass, and fail, or was he to jump into it manfully and win?

Milly's father was in the cab of the engine hauling Twenty-eight. If Harding hung back, unnerved, what would Milly have to say? Again, and much more to the point, what would William, senior, and Uncle Horace have to say, if they knew and their spectral lips were allowed to speak? On the instant, many things impressed themselves upon the consciousness of Harding. There was a switch key in his pocket. He had carried it as a sort of pocket piece ever since his roundhouse days. He had clung to it, during the past year, as he had clung to his father's watch—it was a reminder, a memento, a link that bound him to the old division. Then Harding was familiar with the road. He knew that, there at Cardigan, there was a three-mile run off the main lead, a spur that led to the north and into a gravel pit. Could he throw the wreckers onto that spur?

He flashed his eyes up and down the track. It was a hundred feet from where he stood to the switch. Already Twenty-eight had nosed around the hill, and the eye of the engine hauling the wreckers was blotted out by a patch of timber a little way beyond the switch.

Kent, from his cab window, could not see the other train any more than he could see the stop signal—which should have been against him, but wasn't. His train was fifteen minutes late, and he had not gained on his schedule while coming down the mountain. The dispatcher had figured closely, for the necessity of rushing the wrecking outfit to Hesperus was great—very great, indeed, since he had planned to lay out the fast train and let the wreckers have the track.

"Great heavens!" wailed Higgins, cowering against the wall of the station and staring eastward, "what train is that?"

Harding did not answer. He had no time. He was running at top speed toward the switch, gripping the switch key in his hands. He missed his footing when he leaped from the platform to the gloom of the tracks and fell, striking his knee on the rail and rolling over and over in the sharp cinders. In a twinkling he had his feet under him again, and was plunging on.

The engine hauling the wreckers broke from the screen of timber, and Harding found himself full in the headlight's glare. He rushed toward it, jumped clear of the rails to the switch stand, and the light helped him to get the key in the lock; and then he swung back on the target.

The big engine, the flat with the derrick, the box car behind, and the way-car at the end, slewed to the spur and leaped and jumped over the poorly ballasted track that led to the gravel pit. The tail lights of the caboose had barely the key in the lock; then he swung back on the target.

Kent had shut off and thrown on the air; and then, when he found himself safe and with the rails still under him, he let the engine out once more, and Twenty-eight jerked away on the last lap to Crook. He looked out of his window at the form hanging to the switch lever; and, while he knew something had gone wrong, he also realized that the wrong had been righted and that explanations would be called for in due course. So Kent did not halt, but roared on with Twenty-eight, fighting his way back into his schedule.

It was all over in a minute. The fast train vanished into the gloom to the eastward, and the wreckers were halting on the gravel spur and making ready to back down to the main track and find out what in Sam Hill Number Twenty-eight meant by treating an extra's rights in that high-handed fashion.

The engine crew ahead of the derrick was as badly demoralized as the crew ahead of the mail car, for both had rubbed elbows with death in that agonizing moment when the opposing headlights crossed. Berdyn, driver of Engine Eighty-one, which was hauling the wreckers that night, had come out of his chills and tremors to give a beautiful imitation of the army in Flanders. Casey, on the other side of the cab, was doing the same thing.

Meanwhile, Harding, faint and dizzy now that the crisis was safely passed, had thrown the switch a third time so the wreckers could back out of chancery, and then had slumped down in the gravel and cinders. He still had his wits about him, but felt fearfully in need of a little rest and comfort.

Not yet, however, was there to be any rest for him. From the station platform came a cry and the sounds of a scuffle and a fall, all rising faintly above the noises from the spur track. Harding called again on his reserve powers, got his feet under him, and ran toward the station almost as fast as, a little while before, he had run away from it. Under the station lights he saw a black figure prostrate on the planks, while another figure, in wild flight, was just leaping from the platform.

"Stop!" Harding yelled, changing his own course to follow the fleeing form.

An oath came from the shadowy shape. It halted, whirled, and lifted an arm. A flash lit the gloom, preceding by a fraction of a second the stunning report of a firearm.

The shooting was at close quarters, for the point of the revolver was no more than a dozen feet from Harding when the charge was released. Harding felt as though some one had struck

him a blow just above the waistline. He reeled, feeling sure he was wounded, and wondering whether the hurt was serious. The man who had fired the revolver had leaped on into the night. But he did not go far. A stray tie caught his foot, and he went heels over head, seemingly sinking downward into the very earth.

Harding saw this, and straightway ceased worrying about himself. So long as his injury did not interfere with his muscular powers or his ability to use his hands and feet, it was nothing to bother with. The other man had no more than stumbled before Harding was after him again. Harding found the same stray tie in exactly the same way. He tripped on it and fell over it, alighting on hands and knees in a ditch. The other man was squirming around within arm's reach, and Harding reached for him, and the two closed and rolled over and over.

"I'll have your life for this, my buckaroo!" growled a hoarse voice which sounded strangely familiar in Harding's ears.

"You'll never again have as good a chance at my life as you had a minute ago," returned Harding.

"It's you, is it?" snarled the other. "Calamity Bill, Hardluck Harding, the mug that wanted to ride with Chris!"

"The juniper that *did* ride with Chris! And you're Dan, one of the crooks that held up Jonas Prebble and had laid plans to go through the express car of Twenty-eight!"

This mutual recognition, accompanied as it was by assertions on Harding's part that must have been vastly disturbing, injected fresh rancor into the set-to. Suddenly a lantern flashed in Harding's eyes, and he found himself and his antagonist surrounded by several men—Berdyn, for one, and Hackelmyer, in charge of the wrecking train, for another.

"Here," cried Berdyn, seizing Harding by the shoulder, "what's the row? Who fired that shot, and why was it fired?"

"Don't let that scoundrel get away!" panted Harding.

Hackelmyer and two more had the fellow in the reefer jacket. Berdyn, aided by the lantern, got a good look at William.

"If it ain't Hardluck Harding!" gasped the engineer. "Was it you threw the switch?"

"Yes," said Harding.

"Why?" demanded Berdyn irritably, and, of course, foolishly.

"To get you out of the way of Twenty-eight," said Harding.

"But we had right of way to Hesperus!" put in Hackelmyer. "We ought to be halfway up the mountain by now. Trawl will get somebody's scalp for this!"

"The dispatcher was doing a lot of close figuring," explained Harding, "and the night man at Cardigan was off the job."

"How was that?"

Harding stated the facts briefly, keeping himself in the background as much as possible, considering the star part he had been obliged to play in the proceedings.

"Well, I'll be blamed!" muttered Berdyn. "So that"—and he held his lantern in front of the man in the reefer jacket—"is one of the gang that was layin' to stick up the fast train!"

"And Harding whipped us over upon the spur just in the nick of time to keep us from going into Twenty-eight!" exclaimed the wondering Hackelmyer. "I guess his luck must have changed. But we've lost too much time here, Berdyn," he fretted; "we've got to be going on."

Harding's prisoner was half dragged and half carried to the station platform, bound with ropes and laid on the floor of the waiting room. Higgins had crawled into the station, and he lay in a corner, haggard and bleeding and almost spent.

"I'll get division headquarters on the wire," said Harding, "and have a doctor sent up to look after the night man. You wreckers had better be hammering the fishplates—I can do all that's to be done here."

"But maybe there are more of the holdup gang hanging around?" returned Berdyn.

"I'll take chances on that," answered Harding.

So the wreckers went on, and Harding went into the operator's room and began sending an account to headquarters of what had happened at Cardigan. He got some of it on the wire, along with the request for a doctor for Higgins, and then his endurance suddenly snapped and he fell forward across the table.

For an hour the man in the leather cap and reefer jacket fought like a fiend to free his hands of the rope that bound them; but he fought in vain.

CHAPTER IX.

DITCHING OF THE JINX.

WHEN Harding opened his eyes the gray dawn was just looking in at the windows of the Cardigan station. He was out in the waiting room, a blanket under him, and a rolled-up coat adjusted for a pillow. Gardner, the company doctor, sat on a bench near at hand, while no less a personage than Trawl, the division superintendent, was pacing the floor, puffing furiously at a big black cigar. Over near the bound man stood Fordney, the sheriff.

Higgins, bandaged and somewhat improved by the medical attention he had received, sat up on the floor with his back against the wall. He was talking, and Trawl, as he paced the room, and Fordney, as he watched the prisoner, and the doctor, as he kept a watchful eye on Harding, were all listening attentively to the night man.

"Hanged if I know how Harding got here," Higgins was saying; "but he dropped in at just the right time. He had displayed the stop signal for Twenty-eight, but I had pulled it in, not knowing what the last orders were from the dispatcher, and thinking I was doing the right thing to keep the strong-arm fellows from interfering with the treasure Kent was hauling to-night. The two trains would surely have come together, head on, if Harding hadn't made a rush for the switch, thrown the wreckers on the gravel spur, and then swung back on the target as the fast train went through. It was as plucky and as fine a thing as you can imagine, Mr. Trawl!"

He paused, but none of his listeners had anything to say except the man in the leather cap. His feelings found vent in a snarling oath. Higgins went on:

"That fellow there"—and he indicated the prisoner—"jumped me at just about the time track was cleared for Twenty-eight. He'd have finished me off, I guess, if Harding hadn't come on the run. The fellow shot at Harding, and then Harding chased him, downed him, and the men from the wrecking outfit hurried up and gave him a hand. I managed to crawl into the station, and after that there's a blank."

"How did Harding happen to be here?" demanded Trawl.

"Don't know," returned Higgins wearily.

"The dispatcher says he told Harding to get Blake——"

"Then Harding must have been at the boarding house when I crawled out of the baggage room and took in the stop signal. But he couldn't get Blake. Blake went to a dance, last night, and didn't expect to get back till morning."

Gardner stirred a little, and leaned forward. He had seen Harding's eyes flicker and open.

"Harding himself can tell you what else you want to know, Trawl," said Gardner. "He's come around."

The division superintendent and the sheriff stepped to Harding's side.

"How do you feel, Billy?" Trawl inquired.

"Nothing the matter with me," was the answer. "Just fagged, that's all. I must have gone to sleep while I was pounding the key."

He got up slowly and dropped down on the bench beside the doctor. Outside the station stood a light engine. Harding's eyes wandered toward it.

"As soon as I had a talk with Kent," said Trawl, "and as soon as the dispatcher gave me the gist of what you sent in, I corralled Gardner and Fordney and we hustled for Cardigan on a switch bumper." He flicked the ashes

from the end of his cigar and looked thoughtfully at the glowing tip. "Luck seems to have turned for you, Harding," he added

"It began turning on that dispatch you sent to Sweetbriar——"

"Never mind that," the superintendent interrupted, a bit hastily. "You had trouble on the Extra West when I sent you up to Divide with Chris Davy. I heard about it through the rear-end brakeman, and when Davy got back from the west end I gave him a lay-off for thirty days. There wasn't much luck in that for you, was there?"

Trawl's eyes glimmered as they rested on Harding. The latter smiled feebly and took the yellow tobacco sack from his pocket.

"You got my telegram, Fordney?" he inquired.

"Sure," said the sheriff, "and answered it. How did you know who bowled Prebble over and touched him up? Where'd you get your information about the man in the leather cap and the reefer jacket, who was supposed to be on the eastbound freight with Davy —and who wasn't?"

Harding let in the light on that point, bringing the recital down to where he had seen the man on the waycar of Chris Davy's train as it pulled through Divide.

"And that," finished Harding, "is why I sent the message to you, Fordney."

The sheriff, in some excitement, had taken the roll from the tobacco sack, removed the rubber band, counted the bills, and examined the bullion certificate.

"By George!" he exclaimed, astounded. "This bundle of bills totals up the amount swiped from Prebble to a dollar! And the bullion certificate is evidence that can't be side-stepped. The two men, after knocking the miner down and robbing him, must have boarded that Extra West, getting out of town with Davy." The sheriff turned on Trawl. "What sort of freight conductors have you got on your line, anyhow?" he demanded.

"Well," grunted Trawl, "we'll have one less of the wrong sort before I get through with Davy—you can bank on that. Looks to me as though Davy was in bad, all around. He brought at least one of the hoodlums back with him from the west end—probably he brought the other one, too, and maybe more—and he dropped the crowd off at Cardigan, to play hob with Higgins and fix the signals to stop Twenty-eight, so they could hop aboard and go through the express car. That's the reason, Fordney, you couldn't find your man when you went up the Crook City yards to meet Davy's train."

"That's it, sure," agreed Fordney.

"I don't know yet, Billy," continued Trawl, "how you happened to be at Cardigan at just the time a clear-headed, all-around railroad man was needed so badly. How was that?"

Harding explained about his desire to talk with the sheriff and place in legal hands the money belonging to Prebble and the proof regarding those who had robbed him. He went on to tell how he had planned to ride on the engine with Kent, but had changed his mind and used the speeder, thus getting away from Divide more than two hours ahead of the fast train.

"Look here," growled Trawl, "do you mean to say that you came down the mountain in all that wind and rain, with the night as black as a pocket, and on a speeder?"

"Yes."

Trawl whistled. "And you did it without dropping into a cañon," he exclaimed, "or breaking your neck among the rocks! I guess that's proof enough that Fortune has come around to your side. Why did you do it? Why didn't you wait for Kent?"

"Something seemed telling me I had to use the speeder," answered Harding. "I just had the feeling, Mr. Trawl, that I *had* to get down the mountain in a rush."

"Humph! Well, it's a good thing for this company that you made that reckless move. When you got to Cardigan you found the operator's room deserted?"

"Yes."

"And the stop signal against Twenty-eight?"

"Yes. And the dispatcher calling the office. He had been calling it for fifteen minutes, ever since he had tried to catch Kent's train at Divide, and had failed."

"At that time," mused the superintendent, "Higgins had been shot up and dragged into the baggage room, and the scoundrels who had done it were in hiding and waiting for Twenty-eight to happen along and stop for orders. Great guns, what a layout! The dispatcher had to stop the fast train here in order not to lay out the wreckers—and so he was playing directly into the hands of the holdup fellows. What a situation! You left the stop signal displayed and went over to the boarding house after the day man. When you came back, the stop signal had disappeared, for Higgins had crawled out of the baggage room and pulled it in to foil the robbers, not knowing about the washout at Hesperous or the new orders for Twenty-eight. There's a game of cross-purposes in all this that makes a man's head swim! And out of it all came the two trains against each other, and your quick and brilliant work at the switch! Well, well!"

Trawl's cigar had gone out. He took a match from his pocket and slowly relighted the weed.

"You fellows have got this dead wrong," said the man in the leather cap, twisting about on the floor. "I'm Chris Davy's brother, Dan. That cock-and-bull story of Harding's about the yellow tobacco bag is humorous. Harding must have held up Davy himself, and now he's putting it onto me! Chris'll tell you I'm all right."

"I'll gamble a blue stack," snapped Trawl, "that Chris Davy will never turn up to tell me anything. I've got the testimony of the rear-end brakeman to bear out Harding's story; even at that, Harding's bare word is enough for me. Glad to know, though, that you are Chris Davy's brother. That explains why he was so free with rides on his train. Just helping the family, eh?"

"Why did you, and those with you, drop off Davy's train at Cardigan, during the night?" queried Fordney.

"I wonder if the fool thinks I can't identify him as one of the two who made the attack on me?" put in Higgins.

Dan Davy realized that he was so deeply entangled he could not extricate himself. He dropped into a sullen silence and refused to answer any further questions.

"We've got it on him," said Fordney decisively, "and he can't dodge. Looks bad for Chris Davy, too. I'll see what I can do toward rounding up the rest of the gang. Harding, will you send a message for me?"

"I'll do it," put in Trawl. "Harding has earned a rest, I think."

Trawl and Fordney went into the operator's room and the key began to click, calling on deputies to mount and ride to Cardigan, and hunt for another man in a leather cap and reefer jacket and any who might be with him. Just as the superintendent and the sheriff emerged from the operator's room, a young fellow dashed into the station.

"What in Sam Hill has been going on here?" he asked, his troubled eyes ranging from Dan Davy to Higgins.

"Hello, Blake," called the superintendent, "did you enjoy yourself at the dance?"

"I got back, just a little while ago, and they told me at the boarding house that I was wanted during the night, and——"

"Oh, no," proceeded Trawl, "you weren't wanted, and it's a lucky thing, all around, that you weren't here. There was a better man to drop in and fill your place."

"But—what——"

"Never mind what it all means. Youth will have its fling, and I don't begrudge you the dance. Get on the job here, for I'm taking Higgins to the company's hospital to be patched up. Gardner says he ought to be in bed for at least two weeks, and there'll be another night man down this afternoon. Help us get Higgins on the engine."

After the night man had been depos-

ited in the cab, the prisoner was also carried out and loaded aboard.

"You'll go back with us, Billy," said Trawl to Harding.

"If I'm not needed," demurred Harding, "I guess I'll go back to Divide and get a little sleep."

"I'll see that you get to Divide, all right, and I'll see that you get an engine on this division, too. After the men up and down the line hear what happened at Cardigan, they'll be glad enough to work with you. You've pulled the fangs of the jinx, my lad, and I don't see how this road can get along without you. Harding"—and Trawl stretched out his hand with a smile as he spoke—"it will be a pleasure to have you on the pay rolls once more."

Harding, after a year of blighting discouragement, had come into his own. His hand trembled as he reached it toward the superintendent.

"A little energy and determination is all that's needed, Mr. Trawl," he murmured, "to ditch the demons of adversity."

"More than that is needed, Billy," replied Trawl. "Energy and determination are all right, but what would they amount to without a clear head and plenty of grit?"

As Harding, half dazed by his good fortune, followed the superintendent toward the waiting engine, he pulled out his watch—the watch that had been his father's—to note the exact time Trawl had come across with the recognition that was due him.

He gasped when he looked at the timepiece. The lid was gouged and smashed, and bits of brass wheels and fragments of the crystal fell into his palm.

The watch was a wreck, but it had caught and deflected the bullet fired by Dan Davy and, in so doing, had saved Harding's life. In all that series of incidents demonstrating that luck had changed for Harding, this final blunder of chance was not the least.

Floral Bombs

THERE are certain flowers which "explode" in order to scatter their seeds about, but these explosions are silent ones, brought about every seeding time by nature. For a flower to explode with a detonation that can be heard a long distance is quite another thing, and a rarity.

Such an explosion, however, occurred a short time ago in the botanical gardens at Algiers. It was the spathe or the covering of the bunch of blossoms on a great palm tree. This spathe was nearly three feet long, and when the explosion occurred it was hurled to a great distance, while the shattered blossoms arose like a cloud of golden smoke and covered the top of the palm.

The cause of this was the sun's heat, which was unusual, and had actually roasted the flower to the color of rust. The excessive dryness of the air had caused fermentation inside the spathe. A great sirocco, or hot wind from Sahara, had just blown over the palm and agitated the fermenting contents of the spathe.

Such explosions are very rare, but several others are recorded in that part of the world. It is said that an ostrich egg will sometimes explode in the same manner and from the same cause.

Oh, What's the Use

VIPER!" she hissed. "Scoundrel! Wretch! Blackguard! Fool!"

Smiling gently, he rolled a cigarette and applied a light.

"Villain!" she resumed, her eyes flashing vivid fire. "Robber-r-r!"

"Go on," he suggested, puffing lazily at his cigarette. "Go on!"

Then a thought suddenly occurred to her, and she sank hopelessly into a chair at the uselessness of it all. He had been a baseball umpire.

The Big Bet Snapshot—

By Bertram Lebhar

CHAPTER I.

WINGER HAS A SURE THING.

IT was only within the past twelve months that the newspapers had become desirous of publishing Rufus P. Winger's photograph. Prior to that period, he had been too obscure a person to attract their interest. His had been one of those meteoric rises which are not uncommon in Wall Street. Within a year he had amassed a fortune of several million dollars and won for himself the title of "The Copper King"; following which he had placed himself still more in the limelight by marrying Mrs. Irving Lancaster, widow of the railroad magnate, and a woman of such social prominence that nobody could understand why she had given her hand to an upstart like Winger.

Because of these two notable achievements, the press yearned to show the public what Rufus P. Winger looked like. But, unfortunately, the Copper King was not in sympathy with this yearning. Perhaps it was the fact that he was far from being an Adonis which caused him to shun the camera. He was so fat that he had three chins; his head was as bald as a billiard ball; his ears were abnormally large, and stood out at right angles from his head. Whether he was sensitive about these physical characteristics, or whether it was for some other reason, he had a deep-rooted aversion to being photographed, and still more of an aversion to having his picture appear in the newspapers.

He went to unusual lengths to dodge the persistent journalistic snapshotters, and thus far he had been successful. True, portraits of him appeared from time to time in the newspapers and magazines, but these were merely wash drawings done by more or less skilled artists, and in some cases so cleverly faked that they appeared to be the product of the camera. No photographer had yet been able to get a genuine picture of him.

"But they'll get you, all right, before long, Rufe," predicted Ben Williams, the sugar magnate, whom the newspapers had nicknamed "Bet-a-million" Williams, because of his reckless habit of making enormous wagers on the slightest provocation. "The man doesn't live who can keep his face out of the papers if they're determined to have it.

It's a marvel to me how you've managed to keep them at a distance for so long."

Winger smiled complacently. "Those rascals will have to think up some brand-new tricks before they can get the best of me," he boasted.

"They'll get you—smart as you are," Williams reiterated. "I'll bet you any amount you like that before long I'll pick up a paper and see your buxom countenance scowling at me from the front page."

Winger looked at him searchingly. "What makes you say that?" he demanded sharply.

"Merely my faith in the gumption and push of the American newspaper men," the other answered. "You might as well hope to escape Judgment Day as those nervy chaps. I'm willing to bet you a hundred thousand that one of them will have your picture inside of six months."

Winger laughed. "If I thought you were serious, Ben, I'd grab that proposition," he said quietly. "It looks like easy money to me."

"I was never more serious in my life," the other declared. "I'll double the wager, if you like, and I'll make the time limit three months instead of six. Come, that's a fair challenge."

For a few seconds Winger puffed at his cigar in thoughtful silence. Then his fat, moonlike face lighted up. "I'll take you up on that, Ben!" he announced.

"Good!" exclaimed Williams, producing a memorandum book. "Two hundred thousand at even money that the camera will get you within three months. Any conditions?"

"It is understood, of course, that you will in no way give aid or encouragement to the enemy," Winger stipulated.

"That's only fair," the other acquiesced. "Those fellows won't need any help from me," he added, with a chuckle. "Foxy though you are, they're more than a match for you."

"The picture must be published in a newspaper," declared Winger, "and it's got to show all of my face. Profiles won't count."

"That's drawing the line rather fine," protested Bet-a-Million Williams. "However, I'm game. I've got such a cinch that I can afford to be generous. For me to win, the paper has got to publish a front view of your map."

Winger laughed confidently. "Any conditions on your side, Ben?"

"Only one—that you agree to remain within the United States. The foreign snapshotters may be all right, but I'm not betting on their ability to get you."

"If I have to go abroad, the wager is off," Winger agreed. "At present, I haven't any intention of leaving New York; if I do, I assure you it won't be to dodge those chaps."

"Very good," chuckled Williams, jotting down the terms of the bet in his memorandum book.

The scene of this conversation was the grillroom of the Bankers' and Brokers' Club. Many a big wager had been made in that room, but none of them for so large a sum or on such a freakish proposition as this. Those who sat within earshot stared curiously at the pair in the corner, scarcely believing that the two men could be serious.

Aware of this attention, Winger slightly raised his voice, as he said: "Of course, this business must go no farther than this room. I wouldn't want the newspapers to get hold of it. They'd make a most unpleasant sensation of it."

"No fear of that," Williams assured him, relying upon the club's unwritten law that no member must divulge to the outside world aught of any transaction made within its walls.

As he stepped out, an hour later, Rufus P. Winger glanced cautiously up and down Fifth Avenue, to make sure that there was none of the hated camera tribe lurking in ambush. The hour was past midnight, but that fact did not cause him to feel quite safe. More than once, it had happened that a rascally photographer had made a daring, though futile, attempt to take a flash light of him on the street.

Nor was he trusting now to his own eyes alone. Prior to his exit from the

building, he had received a report from the club's watchman that the coast was clear; moreover, the chauffeur seated at the wheel of the limousine was an alert, powerfully built fellow who had been supplied by a detective agency, and who had standing orders to keep his weather eye open for the Copper King's snapshotting foes. This man jumped from his seat as his employer appeared in the doorway of the club building and kept close to his side until the latter had crossed the sidewalk and entered the car, ready to interpose his broad frame between Winger and any camera man who might suddenly bob up.

It was because he never appeared in public without taking these elaborate precautions that Winger was so confident of his ability to dodge the camera. "Poor Ben!" he chuckled, as he leaned back against the leather upholstery of the car and lighted a fresh cigar. "This is going to be the easiest money I've ever made. It'll be as easy as forgetting your umbrella."

CHAPTER II.

A CHANCE FOR THE CAMERA CHAP.

TOM PAXTON, managing editor of the New York *Sentinel*, dropped into a cigar store on his way to the office and came out again with a piece of news so important that he heartily congratulated himself upon the fact that he had run short of tobacco.

It was the cigar-store man who gave him the story. "Hear about the big bet that was made at the Bankers' and Brokers' Club, last night?" he inquired, handing the package across the counter.

"I don't believe I did," replied the editor. "What was it?"

"Rufus P. Winger bet Ben Williams two hundred thousand dollars that none of you newspaper men could get a snapshot of him within the next three months. Just think of it! Two hundred thousand! Some bunch of greens, eh?"

The editor smiled skeptically. "When did you dream this, Harris?" he inquired.

"I didn't dream it. It's true. It was told to me by my brother, this morning; and he ought to know."

"Why ought he to know?"

"Because he works as butler for a man named Holwood, who is a stockbroker and a member of the club," explained the cigar-store man. "Holwood was at the club last night and heard the bet made. He was telling his wife all about it at the breakfast table this morning."

Paxton resolved mentally that he would send out a reporter to interview Mr. Holwood as soon as he got to the office; aloud, he merely said: "Don't you think that Brother James might have been kidding you?"

"If you knew him, you wouldn't ask such a question," replied the cigar-store man. "He's the most serious fellow you'd ever want to meet, Mr. Paxton."

"Well, I wouldn't speak about this to anybody else, if I were you, Harris," the editor advised. "It might get your brother into trouble."

"You're right, sir," agreed the tobacco man. "James'd probably lose his job if his boss found out that he'd been talking. I shan't mention it to another soul."

"If he adheres to that resolution we'll have a nice little scoop," chuckled Paxton to himself, as he walked out of the shop.

But Harris' love of gossip proved greater than his discretion. Half an hour later, when a young man named Gale dropped in to purchase a package of cigarettes, he was greeted with the salutation: "Good morning, Mr. Gale. Hear about the big wager at the Bankers' and Brokers' Club last night?"

"No, I didn't," replied Mr. Gale, who happened to be on the reportorial staff of the New York *Daily News*, the *Sentinel's* most bitter rival. "Tell us about it, old man."

Whereupon the talkative Harris repeated the story which his Brother James had confided to him, and young Mr. Gale hurried to the *News* office in a highly elated frame of mind.

In the meantime Paxton had sent out a reporter to try to get confirmation of the tip. He was too cautious an editor

to use the story in its present uncorroborated form.

This reporter, a keen young man named Johnstone, was gone several hours. The task before him was not an easy one. Holwood, the imprudent broker who had unconsciously been responsible for the leak, granted him an interview under the impression that his visitor had come to get some information about the market, but closed up like a clam when he learned the object of the latter's call.

At the office of Rufus P. Winger, Johnstone was reminded of the Copper King's rule never to talk to the press. Ben Williams, who liked newspaper men, received him genially and offered him a big black cigar, but began to talk about the state of the weather when the reporter broached the subject of the big wager.

By persistent plugging Johnstone at length managed to get hold of another member of the Bankers' and Brokers' Club who had been present when the bet was made, and who was finally persuaded to talk, on the *Sentinel* man's pledged word that the source of his information would never be revealed. So he returned in triumph to the *Sentinel* office. "The tip was straight goods!" he reported laconically to the managing editor.

"Confirmed it, have you?" said Paxton. "Good work! Write a column on it. Make it a josh yarn. Didn't run across anybody else working on the same tip, did you?" he inquired.

"I'm afraid I did," the reporter answered. "I met Gale, of the *News*, at Ben Williams' office. He was going out as I came in, and I only caught the tail end of his conversation with Williams; but I heard enough to put me wise that he was on the same assignment."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Paxton. "I was in hopes that we were going to have it all to ourselves." Then his face cleared. "Well, after all, the story doesn't matter much. The picture's the thing!" he muttered. "If Hawley's in the office, Johnstone, tell him I want to see him."

A few minutes later a slim, good-looking young man with a merry twinkle in his blue eyes, came into the managing editor's office. "Understand you're looking for me, Tom," he said.

It is not for the general run of staff photographers to call their managing editor by his first name, but the Camera Chap's position on the *Sentinel*—in the whole newspaper world, in fact—was unique. So great was his skill, ingenuity, and daring that he was to other camera men as a great medical specialist is to the ordinary practitioner. He was a more valued member of the staff than the star reporter. He drew a salary not much smaller than Paxton's own.

"I was," the managing editor replied. "Have you ever been up against Rufus P. Winger?"

"No; I understand he's a tough proposition. I've been wanting to have a try at him; but I've been so busy with other things that I've never had time to get to it."

"The time has come," declared Paxton. "We've got to have his picture, Frank. He's made a wager of two hundred thousand dollars with Bet-a-Million Williams that it can't be done."

"Isn't he careless with his money!" exclaimed the Camera Chap, laughing. "When must we have the picture?"

"Well, I shouldn't be exactly peeved if you were to bring it in before first edition time to-night," replied the other dryly, "but I scarcely expect you to succeed so quickly. You've got three months—if necessary."

"I hope it isn't going to take quite that long," returned Hawley. "No limit to the expense account, I presume?"

"Of course not. Get that picture, old man, and we won't quarrel about how much it costs."

"I'll do my best," the photographer promised.

"Better be careful!" Paxton called after him, as he started toward the door. "I guess you'll find Winger a foeman worthy of your steel. I've heard that up at his mansion on Riverside Drive he's got a room filled with cameras which he has taken away from

various newspaper men who've tried to snapshot him. They say he's as proud of that collection as other millionaires are of their art treasures."

"If that's a fact, I ought to be ashamed of myself for not having taken a shot at him long before now," declared the Camera Chap.

Paxton chuckled. "I've got a hunch that Ben Williams is going to win his two hundred thousand," he mused, as his visitor went out. "At all events, I'm sure of one thing: If Hawley can't land that picture, nobody can."

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST SKIRMISH.

POSSIBLY the architect who designed the Billion Building did not know that Rufus P. Winger was to be a tenant there; but if he had borne that fact in mind when he drew the ground-floor plans, he could scarcely have designed them more in accordance with the requirements of the Copper King; for there were no less than five means of exit from the street level. Winger found that choice of doorways very convenient in dodging snapshotters.

But when the Camera Chap arrived there it looked at first as if the task allotted to him was going to be an easy one. A maroon-colored limousine car stood outside one of the five entrances of the beehive of financial activity, and on its door panels were the interwoven initials "R. P. W." It did not require much perspicacity to deduce therefrom that this was the Copper King's chariot.

Two young men, one of whom had a camera in his hand, stood on the opposite sidewalk. Their attention was concentrated on the maroon limousine. "Gale and Moriarity, of the *News*," muttered Hawley, as he caught sight of this pair. "It's evident that I'm going to have competition on this job."

"See who's here!" whispered Moriarity to his companion. "Hang it all! I guess that queers our chance of getting a scoop."

Gale, a dapper, good-looking young man—at least, he would have been good looking if it hadn't been for his shifty eyes—scowled as he glanced in the direction of the Camera Chap. But the scowl was only transitory. As he stepped across the street to meet the newcomer, his manner was cordial. "Hello, old scout!" he exclaimed. "What's on your mind?"

"Why," replied Hawley carelessly, "I was just passing by. That's a nice-looking car there. Whose is it?"

"You can search me. I hadn't noticed it before. Moriarity and I are waiting here for some friends."

"By the way," observed Hawley, "hasn't Rufus P. Wagner an office in that building?"

"I believe he has," admitted Gale.

"And the monogram on that car appears to be his," pursued the Camera Chap. "Looks as if he's about to go home, doesn't it? I think I'll wait and take a shot at him as he comes out?"

"What do you want his picture for?" demanded the *News* reporter sharply.

"What a question!" replied Hawley. "A rare bird like Winger is always worth snapshotting. His picture'll make a valuable addition to our morgue."

Then Hawley moved on and stationed himself a few yards away from the waiting automobile. Gale returned to Moriarity. "We've got to get rid of that fellow somehow," he said gloomily. Then his face lighted up. "No, we haven't. Let him stay there. I can fix him all right."

"How?" inquired the *News* photographer.

"It's an old trick," chuckled Gale. "I've played it on Hawley before; but that's no reason why I can't do it again. We'll go and stand alongside of him, and when Winger comes out I'll step in front of his camera and spoil the picture. That will give you a clear field."

"Great idea!" approved Moriarity. "Hello! what's he doing? He seems to be going away!"

True enough, the Camera Chap was walking briskly up the street away from the Billion Building, as though he had given up the idea of snapshotting the Copper King. Puzzled by this maneu-

ver, Gale hurried after him. "Where are you going, old man?" he inquired pleasantly. "Thought you were going to wait for Winger?"

"Well, I was," replied Hawley carelessly. "But I'll let him go until I get a better chance at him. So long."

Gale's face was one broad grin as he returned to Moriarity and told him the good news.

"I had a suspicion that the *Sentinel* was on to that tip about the bet," he said. "I ran across Johnstone in Ben Williams' office this afternoon, and I figured that he was there on that story. But I guess I was mistaken. If the *Sentinel* knew of Winger's bet with Williams, you can be sure Hawley wouldn't quit like this."

For another hour the *News* men continued their patient vigil on the sidewalk opposite the main entrance of the Billion Building. At the end of that period they observed something which caused their pulses to quicken. The chauffeur of the maroon limousine car got down from his seat and went into the building. He came out again in a few minutes and began to crank up his machine.

Gale nudged Moriarity excitedly. "Winger's coming out now! Get ready." They crossed the street and took up a position near the car. A man came out of the Billion Building and entered the automobile. Moriarity's camera clicked.

"I got him, all right!" the *News* photographer exulted, as the car started off. "Talk about your soft snaps! Say, Winger must have been crazy to make that bet with Williams. This little gem of a picture is going to cost him two hundred thousand plunks."

"I guess not!" exclaimed Gale, in a tone of deep disgust. "That wasn't Winger. We've been stung."

"Wasn't Winger!" echoed the camera man. "Then who was it? It certainly was Winger's car."

"Oh, yes; it was Winger's car, all right," rejoined the other. "I begin to suspect that he planted it there purposely to fool us. There's more than one exit to this building, and I guess he's made his get-away by one of the others while we've been hanging around here like a couple of boneheads."

"You may be right," said Moriarity. "Come to think of it, I fancied I saw that chauffeur's lip twitch in a peculiar way a little while ago when he looked over at us. Say!" he added, as a sudden thought struck him. "Do you suppose that was the reason Hawley quit? Do you think he saw through Winger's game?"

A scowl was the only answer that Gale vouchsafed to this question. The same disquieting thought had just entered his own mind.

Meanwhile, Rufus P. Winger, seated with his private secretary in an automobile that did not look anything like the maroon limousine, was traveling swiftly uptown.

"That was a great idea of yours, sir, to place that other car in front of the building as a decoy," remarked the secretary.

"Pretty neat, eh?" chuckled the Copper King. "Those rascals will have to get up pretty early in the morning to get the best of R. P. Winger. For every trick they've got I can go them one better."

The automobile came to a stop outside an imposing white stone structure on Riverside Drive. "Here we are at the house!" exclaimed Winger. "All clear, Ferguson?" This to the chauffeur, who had jumped down from his seat and opened the door of the tonneau.

"All clear, sir," the detective-chauffeur assured him. "There isn't one of the camera fiends in sight."

The secretary got out first; Winger's portly figure followed. Just as the latter stepped heavily to the sidewalk a slim young man darted out from behind some bushes and confronted him. Winger gave vent to a growl of mingled indignation and dismay as he caught sight of the camera pointed toward him. The secretary and the chauffeur stood as though paralyzed by surprise.

The Copper King wore a soft felt hat with a broad brim. He had presence of mind enough to cover his face

with it, just as the camera's click told him that his picture had been taken. "Catch that scoundrel!" he roared, as Hawley side-stepped and darted across Riverside Drive. "Don't let him get away!"

The discomfited chauffeur-detective who had not thought to look behind the hedge and thus had overlooked this lone representative of the enemy, now endeavored to make amends for his carelessness by giving chase; but the Camera Chap was too nimble for him. A taxicab was waiting a short distance up the driveway. It was off like a flash as Hawley jumped inside.

"You're fired!" Winger shouted savagely as the chauffeur returned. "I stand a swell chance of winning that bet with a dead one like you on the job. Phew! That was a narrow escape," he exclaimed, turning to his secretary. "Fortunately, I was able to cover my face just in time. I'm quite sure he couldn't have got much of a picture. But we'll have to look out for that man in future. He's dangerous."

CHAPTER IV.

RUN TO COVER.

THE Camera Chap was not very well pleased with the picture which he brought to the *Sentinel* office. When the plate was developed, it showed only a very fat man, hiding his face behind a broad-brimmed hat. Since none of Winger's features appeared in it, this snapshot of course could not win the wager for Bet-a-Million Williams.

"It was the best I could do, Tom," said Hawley apologetically to Paxton. "I feel like kicking myself for going up there and tackling him in such a raw manner. I ought to have realized that an expert camera dodger like Rufus P. Winger was not to be caught by such crude methods. But I wanted to get the picture for to-morrow's paper, if possible, so I took a long chance."

"It's all right, old man," said Paxton consolingly. "It's more than I expected you to get on your first attempt. Just keep plugging away, even if it takes you the whole three months. You're bound to get him sooner or later. Anyway," he added, examining the wet print which Hawley had handed him, "you made him to do the turtle act. We'll use this picture in to-morrow's paper with a josh story under it. I guess that will be more than the *News* will have."

As the days went by, it began to look as if the Camera Chap was going to stretch his assignment to the full time limit. Three weeks passed, and Winger still remained unphotographed. Hawley employed all his ingenuity, resourcefulness, and nerve in his endeavor to land the coveted snapshot, but found the wily Wall Street man a little too much for him.

His experiences forced him to realize that he was up against the biggest problem of his career. His fertile imagination, as full of tricks as a magician's suit case, seemed unable to devise a ruse which his alert antagonist was not able to see through. His most daring attempts proved fruitless. Several times, to be sure, he came within an ace of the prize, but always at the last moment Rufus P. Winger managed to save his face.

In spite of his success, however, Mr. Winger's life was not a happy one. Hawley was by no means the only snapshotter who kept him busy dodging. The stories of the big wager which appeared in the *Sentinel* and the *News* had caused the editors of the other papers which had not had the story to endeavor to make amends by being the first to publish the picture of the Copper King. Hordes of photographers besieged Winger's office, his town house, and his clubs; and this local snapshotting brigade was soon augmented by reënforcements from out-of-town newspapers. For the story of the big wager had spread throughout the country, and editors of other cities eagerly picked up the gauntlet which the Copper King had thrown down.

The situation soon proved very trying to his nerves—for Mr. Winger had nerves, although that fact had not been suspected in Wall Street. His intimates soon observed that he was beginning to

lose flesh. They fancied that they detected a hunted expression in his eyes. His valet on more than one occasion overheard him talking about cameras in his sleep.

"Want to call the wager off, Rufe?" Ben Williams suggested generously. "I didn't figure on the papers finding out about it and coming at you as strong as this. There are more than twenty men waiting outside this building for you, right now; I noticed 'em as I came in. If you want to call the bet off, I'm willing."

Winger scowled at the suggestion. "Call it off!" he growled. "I should say not! Those jackals can't faze me. Let 'em come by the hundreds if they want to. I'll show 'em that I'm more than a match for 'em."

The sugar magnate shrugged his shoulders. "I think you're foolish. Even if they don't get your picture, they'll hound you into nervous prostration long before the three months are up. However, if you don't want to quit, it's your funeral, not mine."

A crafty expression came to Winger's moonlike face. "Say, Ben, there's nothing in the terms of our wager to prevent me from skipping out of town and going into hiding, is there?" he inquired.

Bet-a-Million Williams frowned thoughtfully. "No, I don't think I mentioned that. Of course, I took it for granted——"

"It's a bad policy to take anything for granted, Ben," the other interrupted, with a chuckle. "As long as it wasn't mentioned, I think I'll crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after me. Things are going to be pretty slow on the Street for the next few weeks, anyway, and I need a vacation."

The next day the camera brigade sought in vain for Rufus P. Winger. He had dropped out of sight as completely as if the ground had opened and swallowed him up. For three weeks his whereabouts remained a baffling mystery, but at the end of that period the Camera Chap stepped into Managing Editor Paxton's office, a triumphant smile on his face.

"I've located his hiding place, Tom," he announced. "He's at Bellingham Manor, the Connecticut estate of his friend, Fred G. Potter."

"Good work!" commented Paxton. "Have you been up there?"

"Not yet. I'm going right away. There's a train leaving in half an hour."

Paxton nodded. "Better take a reporter along; you may need an assistant. I'll assign Johnstone, your old side partner. Hope you have luck this time, old man. I'd give my right eye for that snapshot. Any of the other fellows know where he is?"

"I don't think so. I did my sleuthing all alone. That's why I feel confident that we're going to win out this time. With so many camera men on the job, it was difficult to accomplish anything. We've all been treading on each other's heels and stirring up such a fuss that none of us had a fair show. Now, I hope to have the field all to myself."

But half an hour later, as Hawley and Johnstone stood at the ticket window of the Grand Central Station, they were recognized by two young men, one of whom carried a camera outfit. Gale and Moriarity, of the *News,* had gone to the railway terminal to interview and snapshot the heroine of a sensational breach-of-promise case, who was expected to arrive on the Empire State Express. The train had come in, and, having satisfied themselves that the lady was not on it, they were about to go back to the office when Gale caught sight of the two *Sentinel* men.

Unobserved by the latter, he managed to edge up close enough to the ticket window to hear Hawley ask for two tickets to Bellingham. "Wonder what the deuce they're going there for?" he whispered to his companion. Then a glint came to his eyes as an idea dawned upon him. "Great Jericho! I wonder if they're on the trail of Winger!"

"What makes you think that?" inquired Moriarity.

"I know that Hawley has been hunting for him for the past three weeks.

He's got a standing assignment to find him. I'll bet a ten-dollar bill to the hole in a doughnut that he's picked up a clew."

As the Camera Chap and his companion hurried out toward the train, Gale stepped up to the ticket window. "Two tickets for Bellingham," he requested.

"What in blazes are you doing?" queried Moriarity, in astonishment.

"We're going to take a little trip," said Gale, reaching out his hand for the tickets. "We'll accompany our friends of the *Sentinel* to Bellingham—but without their knowledge. I feel confident that it will pay us."

"But aren't you going to let the office know?" demanded Moriarity, following his companion as the latter hurried toward the train. "The boss will raise the dickens if we don't report on our assignment."

"We'll report from Bellingham, over long-distance telephone," Gale answered, over his shoulder. "I've got a hunch that we'll have something worth while to report."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY.

BELLINGHAM MANOR, the country estate of Fred G. Potter, the financier, was an ideal retreat for a man who wished to dodge snapshotters—not that its owner had any great objection to being photographed. Cranks were his particular bugaboo. He had once had a terrifying experience with a long-haired, wild-eyed person who had forced his way into his presence and demanded a million dollars to finance a scheme to manufacture artificial oranges, and that experience had caused him to take elaborate precautions to keep out intruders.

The two thousand acres of the estate were patrolled by a guard, and there were signs all over the grounds warning trespassers that they would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. In addition, there was an elaborate system of bell signals, by means of which, in the event of the appearance of a suspicious-looking stranger, the alarm could be sounded simultaneously all over the estate. Scattered at frequent intervals were all sorts of ingenious hiding places, so that no matter in what part of the grounds the owner of Bellingham Manor might be he could immediately run to cover as soon as he heard the alarm.

Rufus Winger had once spent a week-end with his friend Potter, and had observed these arrangements, and now that he had decided to go into hiding, Bellingham Manor occurred to him as just the place for his purpose. Potter and his family were in Europe, but a cable in cipher asking for the use of his country home brought back a cordial response from the financier urging Winger to consider the estate his own for as long as he needed it. The Copper King and his private secretary sneaked into Bellingham Manor so unobtrusively that none of the villagers suspected their presence there. They did not even know that any guests had arrived. Murray, Potter's superintendent, had received cabled instructions from his employer to do everything in his power to insure the visitor's privacy and comfort, and had ordered secrecy maintained among all the employees of the estate.

Consequently, when the Camera Chap and Johnstone arrived at Bellingham village and made inquiries among the natives, they were informed that the Manor was closed and that nobody was to be found on the estate except the superintendent and his staff. These statements were made so positively and with such evident sincerity that Johnstone began to wonder whether they hadn't come on a wild-goose chase. In Hawley's mind, however, there was no such doubt. He was confident that he was on the right track. It was through Mrs. Winger that he had discovered Winger's hiding place. She was not with her husband. As the society columns of the press daily recorded, she was entertaining lavishly at their Newport villa. It had occurred to the Camera Chap that by watching her closely, he might get a line on where the Copper King was.

A three days' visit to Newport had enabled him to pick up what looked like a good clew. He had discovered that Mrs. Winger was sending telegrams and letters to a "Mr. Roger Warren, care of Mr. Theodore Murray, Bellingham, Connecticut." Aware of that queer freak of the brain which causes nine men out of ten to adopt assumed names which resemble their own, the Camera Chap suspected that "Mr. Roger Warren" was the man he sought. He felt even more sure when he made inquiries and learned that Theodore Murray, in whose care Warren's mail was addressed, was the superintendent of the country estate of Fred G. Potter, who, Hawley knew, was closely allied with Winger in Wall Street.

"But those telegrams and letters may have been merely a trick to make us think that Winger is here," suggested Johnstone, as he and Hawley sat at supper in the dining room of the Bellingham Inn. "How do you know that Mrs. Winger wasn't wise to the fact that you were watching her? It's mighty queer that none of the natives here appear to have heard about Mr. Roger Warren."

The Camera Chap smiled. "It's that very fact that makes me positive that we're on the right scent," he declared. "I was afraid we were going to find that Mr. Roger Warren was well known in this community. In that case, of course, we could have made up our minds that he wasn't the man we're after. But since the mysterious Mr. Warren is evidently taking pains to keep himself hidden from the merry villagers, it's a safe bet that he's Winger. Why, what's the matter, old man? Is anything wrong?"

The table at which they sat was close to a window which commanded a view of the main street of the village. Through this window Johnstone had seen something which caused him to give vent to an exclamation in which astonishment and disgust were mingled. "Look who's coming!" he said. "Of all the unwelcome sights!"

Hawley glanced out of the window and grinned deprecatingly as he caught sight of two young men who were approaching the inn. "Gale and Moriarity, of the *News!*" he exclaimed. "That's tough luck!"

"After Winger, of course," said Johnstone. "Still, it may not be. Their presence here may be merely a coincidence. We'd better duck before they see us."

"I'm afraid it's too late. Gale has seen us already," said the Camera Chap. "They're coming in here."

A minute later the two *News* men entered the dining room. Gale affected to be greatly astonished at sight of the *Sentinel* men.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Gale breezily, stepping up to the pair at the table. "If this isn't a surprise! What on earth are you fellows doing so far away from Park Row?"

"Exactly the question I was going to put to you," said Hawley.

"I've got an uneasy suspicion that we're all here on the same mission," rejoined Gale. "I suppose you fellows are looking for Winger, too?"

"What makes you think he's here?" demanded Hawley, looking searchingly at the other's face.

"The office got an anonymous tip," lied Gale smoothly. "Hang it all! We thought it was exclusive. Hoped we were going to have Winger all to ourselves. How long have you chaps been here?"

"We arrived on the five-o'clock train."

"Why, that's the train we were on, too!" exclaimed the *News* man, with affected surprise. "Well, seeing that we're all here on the same job, I propose, if it's agreeable to you fellows, that we work together. There isn't much chance of either of us succeeding if we each go it on our own hook. We'd be sure to queer each other."

The Camera Chap and Johnstone exchanged questioning glances. They knew Gale of old—knew that there was not a man in the newspaper business who was less to be trusted. Nevertheless, after a slight pause, Hawley said:

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to join forces."

"Good!" assented Gale. "Well, now that that's settled I'll ask you boys to excuse me for a few minutes while I go hunt a long-distance telephone. I've got to report our arrival to the office."

"I'll go along with you," said Moriarity.

"I don't like the idea of working with those crooks," protested Johnstone, as the *News* men went out. "Considering our past experiences with them, I'm surprised that you'd consent to such an arrangement, Frank."

"Had to do it," said Hawley. "There's a whole lot of truth in what Gale said; if we work at loggerheads there'll be precious little chance of either of us landing Winger's picture. Those duffers would be sure to queer us."

"They'll queer us, anyway—if they get the chance," predicted Johnstone. "Gale won't keep faith with us. That fellow's so crooked that he'd cheat himself at solitaire."

"They're not going to get the chance," rejoined Hawley. "We're going to watch Mr. Gale so closely that he won't have an opportunity to turn any of his tricks, this time."

Meanwhile, the subject of these remarks was seated in a telephone booth talking to his city editor over the long-distance wire. "Hello, boss," said he. "This is Gale talking. I'm up in the wilds of Connecticut. Got Moriarity with me. We got a tip that Winger was here—sure, that's right, Rufus P. Winger—so we thought we'd better chase out here and get his picture. Yes, of course I'm sober. Haven't had a drink all day. How did I get the tip? A Wall Street friend of mine slipped it to me. I can't say for sure that it's going to pan out, but it looks pretty good." He smiled at the question that came to him over the wire. "No, we're not the only ones up here, I'm sorry to say. Hawley is up here, with another *Sentinel* man. Tough luck, isn't it?—No, I don't know where they got the tip. I've got a suspicion, though, that they saw Moriarity and me coming out here and trailed us. That would be just like those *Sentinel* crooks; but don't worry. If Winger is here we're going to get the picture exclusive. I'll find a way of fixing Hawley. You just leave it to little Willy."

TO BE CONTINUED.

The next section of this story will appear in the November mid-month number, which comes out October 15th, so you will have only two weeks to wait.

The Lion of the Fountains

MOST of the things that are customary with us have some good reason for their origin, though we are apt to accept them and not inquire what that reason was. The water in a great many public fountains, whether for man or beast, comes out of a sculptured lion's mouth. Did you ever stop to think why a lion's head should be chosen in preference to any other design? This is said to be the reason: Among the ancient Egyptians the rising of the waters of the River Nile was the most important event of the year, as it meant life and prosperity to the whole nation.

The rising of the waters always took place when the sun was in the constellation of Leo, or the lion. So they adopted the shape of a lion as the symbol for the life-giving waters of the Nile, and all their fountains were carved with a lion's head. The Greeks and Romans copied this symbol, and so it has come down to us.

Respect for the Court

POLICEMAN: "Come along, now, quietly, or it will be the worse for you."

O'Toole: "Oi'll not. The magistrate told me last time niver to be brought before him again, an', begorra, I'm going to obey his instructions."

Talks With Top-Notch Readers

By BURT L. STANDISH

ON THE ROAD

THAT traveling men derive much enjoyment from TOP-NOTCH is one of the gratifying facts to which these letters steadily attest. Often we receive letters from men on the road. Here is one posted at Portland, Maine:

Just a word from a traveling man to let you know how much self and family enjoy reading TOP-NOTCH. We have, however, one big kick coming. Why in thunder did you knock off writing the highly entertaining Bainbridge of Bangor serial, to us the most enjoyable feature of the magazine—and not only that, but leave the plot, like Mohammed's coffin, suspended in mid-air?

For the love of Mike, get busy with Bainbridge of Bangor, and get busy right away! And by the way, since this is an "actual-place" story, it would seem as though Bangor's five-million-dollar fire of April 30, 1911, might be used as a striking episode. Truly yours, LEIGHTON S. ADAMS.

The Bainbridge of Bangor tales have not been given up, but other fiction of a more timely character has taken the place they might have occupied. We shall be able, in an early issue, to give you another Bainbridge story; it is written and awaiting its turn. I think we shall get to it in a couple of issues.

Another traveling man, writing from Elberton, Georgia, thus expresses himself:

I am a knight of the grip, and have been reading your excellent magazine for over two years, and must say it has them all "skint a mile." Your talks with TOP-NOTCH readers are a great scheme, although some of the kicks make me tired. If you complied with the wishes of those who protested against "Forward March," and the many other good stories, your magazine would lose a lot of its readers, for at present one of its strongest assets is its variety.

I am just crazy about your "Lefty" stories, and also enjoy stories by Terhune, Dorrance, Patten, Boston, and Phillips. "Fortune's Challenge," by Emerson Baker, was a pippin. "His Missing Punch," by George M. A. Cain, listened good to us travelers. Give us some more hotel stories. I was connected with several hotels before taking up my present vocation, and naturally like to read about them. Wishing your magazine unlimited success, I remain, respectfully yours,

CHAS. Y. MONTGOMERY.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Have been reading your "Talks" for some time, and at last have mustered the courage to write you my ideas.

It is a waste of space to write the oft-repeated praises for T.-N., as nearly all writers do. I get nearly all the magazines that are published in Chicago, but it seems that the T.-N. has the best staff of authors. You are unparalleled in athletic stories, while Phillips, Lebhar, Patten, Dorrance, and Wm. Wallace Cook are all to the admirable. I don't like Burr's boxing stories, as they are all alike. Yours truly,

WILLARD KOHL.

Chicago, Ill.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: The stories I like best are your Lefty tales and the Camera Chap. Roland Ashford Phillips' stories are excellent. Please give us more stories like "The Début of Props" and "Just Like That." I would like to see a story in your magazine about the tin mills. I have never read one. You should be able to write one. The reason I ask this is because I have been at that trade for a number of years. I never saw a letter from this town. Wishing long life to T.-N., I am, very truly, FRANK WESTON.

New Castle, Pa.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: R. A. Phillips' story "Rung Down" cannot be praised too highly; it was one of the best he has contributed to T.-N. "Hanging It On Keene" and "Getting Hunk With Reilly" ended too soon, although excellent stories.

As I am a printer, and I am sure many more of T.-N. readers are, an article about that art would make a big hit; in case an article of this sort is published, put some life in it, as printers are not dead ones.

C. W. PARKER.

Brooklyn, N.-Y.

CHICAGO, through Mr. Oscar Getz, of East Sixty-fifth Street, that city, sends us the following:

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: What has become of Bob Bainbridge? Make him active! W. E. Schutt is the coming author. His story, "With Rapiers Drawn," was exciting. Please publish more colonial stories. "Forward March" was interesting from the start to the climax. Won't you please ask Mr. Terhune for some serials about the Mexican and Revolutionary Wars?

Burt Lebhar's "Snapshot Diplomacy" was great, and so was "Fortune's Challenge." Ralph Boston's stories are all snappy. What has become of R. Elderdice, writer of such rank tales as "At the Stroke of Twelve" and "The Vaulter of the Red Pole"? "His Rainbow Whiskers" and its sequel were rank; "Under the Oarsman's Mask" was the greatest rowing story I have ever read.

Wish you, TOP-NOTCH, and its group of writers a long and happy life.

Mr. Terhune may be preparing tales of the Revolution and of Mexico, but the only story in sight from him now is one of the actual-place tales that have been so popular. Mr. Terhune has written two or three of them—and each a decided hit—but the story he has just finished seems to us to eclipse all his previous efforts. It is a tale of a Massachusetts town, and the title is "Sprung in Springfield." It has a spring in it, and a punch as well.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: For some time I have been intending to write you and give my opinion of the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE. I have been reading it for several years, and I want to say that it is the best story magazine I have ever read. I always look forward to getting the next number, like a kid after candy, and I have always read every story in the magazine. I have found only two or three stories in T.-N. that did not appeal to my taste, but the rest certainly made up for those few. Yours truly,

J. D. TAYLOR.

FRIENDLY criticism of an interesting type comes to us from a Maryland reader, Mr. C. S. Kelser, of Centreville, that State. He says:

Like the New Haven wireless operator in the August mid-month issue, I want to register a kick at Mr. Roland A. Phillips. In his story "Rung Down," on page 42, he has the Baltimore *News* telling the story of the shooting that occurred at the theater the night before. Now, what puzzles me, is how the *News*, being an afternoon paper, could tell the story at nine a. m. next day after the event. Aside from this, I consider "Rung Down"

one of the very best stories among the many good ones appearing in TOP-NOTCH. I hope you won't consider me a knocker.

I would like some time to see a good story in your pages representing the large army of traveling men or drummers. "Boots and Saddles" is excellent, and in it Mr. Tyson has achieved a masterpiece. Mr. Foster's "Divided Medal" is far beyond the average. In fact, I have not read a poor story in TOP-NOTCH.

Perhaps Mr. Kelser's difficulty arises from his overlooking the fact that in large cities like Baltimore the issuing of "extras" is a common practice of the daily newspapers, be they morning or evening. I should say, however, that it is more frequently the case that the evening paper gets out an extra. Surely the affair at the theater, so vividly pictured by Mr. Phillips, was important enough to warrant the issue of an extra.

By this time it is reasonably certain that Mr. Kelser, along with many thousands of like desire, has welcomed Steve Blake as a worthy representative of the large army of traveling men. "With the Goods," the story in this issue, is the third of the series recounting the adventures, romantic and commercial, of this whole-souled but worldly-wise knight of the grip—the creation of that captain of the fun-makers, J. A. Fitzgerald.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have never seen a letter from these parts in your magazine, so I thought I would give you my opinion of your publication.

One thing that makes me think TOP-NOTCH superior to all magazines is its wonderful variety of stories. It certainly is built as you say. There are railroad stories, theatrical stories, baseball yarns, football stories, detective stories, love stories, actual-place stories, et cetera, et cetera—a variety that is not obtainable in any other magazine, and I read nearly all.

Mr. Standish, you're a splendid writer, as are Phillips, Boston, Dangerfield, Foster, Burr, Terhune, Shafer, and the rest. W. Bert Foster's and Shafer's Revolutionary stories are certainly great; keep them up. And please, oh, please, give us another dramatic novel such as "A Knight of Tennessee," by Clinton Dangerfield.

A story in the last number, "Hinkey's Top Speed," by M. Worth Colwell, was just great. It's the best short story I've read in many a day. Colwell, I think, is new to TOP-NOTCH, but, Mr. Editor, give us more of him.

Wishing you many years of prosperity, I remain, yours truly,

W. H. ZEYDEL.

Catskill, N. Y.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Your short stories are fine stories, like "His Rainbow Whiskers," "Beyond the Law," "Boltwood of Yale," "Sheridan of the U. S. Mail," and "The Film Disposes." These ought to cure the worst case of "blues."

The Camera Chap series is great. Please keep up the stories of the stage. As I am an actor they appeal to me.

H. A. BOONE.

Howard, Kan.

FROM W. Abrahart, 35 Raynham Road, Hammersmith, London, England, we have this:

I am writing to let you know what I think about your stories. I think they are the best I have read. When walking out one day I saw on a paper stall a magazine called TOP-NOTCH. Well, I bought one, and ever since I have been going to that same stall to get your magazine.

When I have read them I get my brother and sisters to read them, and they say, as the American would put it, that is some book. Before I saw this magazine I read many of those published here; since then I have read no other but TOP-NOTCH.

The following also is from an English reader, Mr. A. Jennings, of 27 Field Road, Forest Gate, E. London:

"I really must write to you again and commend you upon the magnificent stories that compose that splendid periodical, TOP-NOTCH. I have read several American magaziues, but TOP-NOTCH comes out far ahead.

One of the best war stories I have read is "Service Courageous," which is typical to a shine of American courage. At that time England and America were bitter enemies, but to-day I honestly believe the Stars and Stripes are getting nearer to the Union Jack for the purpose of shaking hands in friendship. But that's away from my point. The inclosed will be acceptable, I presume. It's a poor attempt. It is made up from the titles of stories in the April mid-month TOP-NOTCH:

"Lefty o' the Training Camp" is far "Beyond the Law"; he "Talks With TOP-NOTCH Readers," and he has "Tips for the Handy Man."

But "The Booming of the Twenty" made him "Pardners" with "A Red Man of the Rail," who, during the "Kit Kirby Campaign," was going to steal "The Planters' Cup."

But "Boltwood of Yale," during "The Début of Props" in the play "Forward, March!" pointed out Lefty's folly, and during the performance he often "Wished Him on Washington." Henceforth he gave up his outlandish ways "By Favor of the Sea."

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I like some of your stories very much, while others I think are poor. Baseball is getting stale, and the Camera Chap tales are too tiresome. I liked "On the Rail at Nowhere," and "Boltwood of Yale." I liked "Forward March," but thought that it was impossible for him to escape all the time. And no man is so foolish to risk his life in such a way. Please get some water-sport stories, and don't have so many mysteries and short stories.

But, of course, it may be my taste for different stories. I like your magazine very much, and hope that it will continue for a good many years. Yours truly, GEROLD HENNESSEY.

Waukeshaw, Wis.

FROM Mendocino, California, we have this, the writer being Walter A. Jackson:

I've been a reader of your magazine for many months, and I thought I would boost and kick a little. My favorite authors are all of them save Berton Braley. He is some poet, but as a writer of prose he is the limit. Such a story as his "Too Tame" makes a person want to kick the tomcat into the well. However, I am but one of many, and while I don't like stories that overstep all bounds of possibility, still there are others who do.

Please give us some stories about billiards, bowling, handball, and swimming. Of the thousands of stories that I've read I do not remember one that had to do with bowling or handball.

Give us plenty of baseball and boxing stories. A great many TOP-NOTCH readers are young men, and to them baseball and boxing are familiar.

Hoping that the wastebasket will not have the ill luck to be the recipient of this virgin criticism of mine, I wish the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, and its readers the best of success.

We have had stories about all the sports this correspondent mentions, with the exception of handball. It is because we have not been able to get a good one that we have had to forego publishing a handball story. The bowling tale, by Leslie W. Quirk, which we printed, appeared after the receipt of Mr. Jackson's letter. Sport stories—those relating to the indoor as well as outdoor branches—will be continued in generous measure in TOP-NOTCH.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Kindly allow an ardent TOP-NOTCH admirer a few lines in your interesting "talks." I have no criticism to make, but just a suggestion to show that Newark *is* on the map. I have never seen a story in your valuable magazine laid in the Industrial City. Please give us something made in Newark. I'm sure we can give you

more than enough material, to show you that "Newark knows how." It is the largest city in the United States except thirteen—population, 370,000. I remain, yours truly,

EDWARD C. BEYER.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Have been reading T.-N. for some time, and am delighted with it. The only thing I got to kick about is that it ought to be published every week, as when I read one issue I can hardly wait for the next.

My favorites are Mr. Dorrance and Mr. Lebhar. Let's have some more of the Camera Chap and Bainbridge of Bangor. With my best wishes,

VAL A. ROBERTSON.

Glenmore Avenue, Westwood, Cincinnati, Ohio.

MR. CLARENCE WALBRIDGE, of Valencia, California, who has been reading TOP-NOTCH about a year, sends this:

I want to say that "Rung Down," by Roland Ashford Phillips, is about the best story of theatrical life I've ever read in TOP-NOTCH. The serial, "Boots and Saddles," is very interesting, and I am waiting impatiently for the next issue. The short stories are fine.

My favorite authors are: R. A. Phillips, Emerson Baker, Bertram Lebhar, Ralph Boston, Burt L. Standish, Gilbert Patten, and Albert Payson Terhune. I wish TOP-NOTCH a long life and success.

The latest product of Mr. Phillips' pen appears in this issue. Though not a theatrical story, it looks to us the equal in dramatic fiber of that much-admired tale, "Rung Down." The title of the new story is "The Turquoise Owl."

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have been a reader of your magazine ever since it was published, and think it is one of the best. Being in the real-estate business, I can appreciate the story called "No Head for Busineses." The reason the story appealed to me was because it is true to life, and could happen every day. Let me also compliment you on the story "An Unofficial Champion." It was simply great. It is one of the greatest boxing stories I have ever read. I have almost forgotten to tell you to have another one of those Camera Chap stories. They are simply great. Wishing your magazine the greatest success, I am, yours very truly,

GEO. FLIEGELMAN.

Philadelphia, Pa.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have been reading T.-N. since its birth, and I think it the best ever. I have a few suggestions to make. Why not increase the number of pages to 224, and charge fifteen cents? I am sure that many readers will agree with me on this point. Also give us more of the Camera Chap stories. Why not have some actual-place stories of the South? Tell Mr. Fitzgerald not to let up on those baseball stories. Brick King is fine, as was also "The Divided Medal." Give us another "Boltwood of Yale" story. Here's hoping T.-N. will be successful till the lights go out. Please print this, as some of my friends think this department is a fake. Yours for success, H. H. KIERNAN.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I am a constant reader of the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, and am very enthusiastic about it. Such complete novels as "Wished on Him in Washington" and "The Burlington Buddha" are splendid. I do not lose an opportunity to praise TOP-NOTCH to my friends. Yours very truly,

LOUIS KAMINSKY.

Houston Street, New York.

MR. ROY GLASS, of Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, in the course of his letter says:

I have never noticed any letters from this part of Pennsylvania. TOP-NOTCH is surely a magazine to be proud of, and although some of the stories do not please me, I realize that you have a

great many other readers to consider. Now, I would like to register a little kick. You do not deal enough in fields of literature outside of the United States, or with tales of the Civil and the Mexican Wars, nor of the French and Indian War. There are also wonderful fields outside of the United States. Once in a while we get a story from Canada or Alaska, but never from South America, Europe, Asia, or Africa. I will temper that last statement by saying not very often; but even at that I wish to say I am well pleased with TOP-NOTCH, and hope it will live forever.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have just finished reading "Brick King, Backstop," and think it another dandy. Have been waiting for another story from your pen for some time. I am and have been for two years a regular subscriber to TOP-NOTCH, and can truthfully say that it is the best published—in fact, the only one I can pick up and read each story as it comes and find interest in each one. I am a great motor-cycle "fiend," and would like to see a story of this sort published soon. Yours respectfully, GEO. H. WELLS.

Bowie, Texas.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: This is the first time I have ever written for the "talks," and for some little time I read your magazine without looking at them. But lately I looked back, and immediately was interested.

I am immensely satisfied with your stories, and especially your serials. Give us more like the "Divided Medal," "Fortune's Challenge," and "At the Film's Command," "Boots and Saddles," and the "Camera Chap" were good. I enjoyed the "Purple Emperor," "Roped Rivers," and "In Their Own Coin" very much.

As M. Steuer said, I wish to "bawl out" Mr. Kendall in speaking as he did of James Barr's "Price of a Life." It was good for a change. I think it read better backward. L. J. BAILEY.

Detroit, Mich.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have been a constant reader of your magazine for ten months, and can truthfully say that I never read a better magazine. Every story in it is clean, wholesome, and interesting. I like all the sporting, theatrical, and Western stories I have seen published in TOP-NOTCH.

My favorite authors are Roland A. Phillips, J. F. Dorrance, and Ralph Boston, while H. C. Burr and Gilbert Patten are fine. My favorite stories are "Boltwood of Yale" and its se
"The College Rebel," "S
U. S. Mail," "
"Beauty O'Brien,"
forty"; but all stories
you pay ten cents for Top-
buy stories and nothing else.
the good work.

Wishing you a long life and continual success, I remain, a TOP-NOTCH enthusiast, HARRY PITTS.

South Braintree, Mass.

MR. J. PHELPS, of Montreal, Canada, sends wishes of good luck, and goes on to say:

Having been a reader of delightful TOP-NOTCH for over three years, would like to express my opinion. I am a lover of sporting stories, as every true American is. Every time that I get a new TOP-NOTCH I go for them first. I wish that you could give us more. I have just started "Brick King, Backstop," and by the looks of the first installment it's going to be a hummer. I don't understand how TOP-NOTCH only sells for ten cents when, in my opinion, it beats any of the fifteen-cent magazines. The only thing that's wrong with TOP-NOTCH is that it ought to be published every week instead of twice a month.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have read the TOP-NOTCH for about one year, and I like it as well as any magazine on the market. My favorite authors are William Wallace Cook, Frank A. Shaw,

J. A. Fitzgerald, Harold C. Burr, Burt L. Standish, and W. Bert Foster.

I would like to have William Wallace Cook write another story like "Ways That Are Dark." P. E. D.

Springfield, Mass.

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: About two years ago a friend of mine gave me an old copy of T.-N., and I haven't missed an issue since.

I read the "Talks With TOP-NOTCH Readers" every issue, and I can say that I don't agree with the letter from Mr. Frank C. Rockfield about not putting any more stories in T.-N. like "Dark Magic." Although I will admit it was impossible, it was interesting, exciting all the way through.

I wish you would put in more stories like "The College Rebel," "The Lucky Bottle," "Roped Rivers," "The Man of the Minute," "The Woodbine Mystery," "Who Laughs Last," and last, but not by any means least, some more Camera Chap tales. Yours truly,

CLARENCE E. REDMAN.

Alamosa, Colo.

Recruiting War Birds

...n of how to combat airships is one which nations are very much ...rried about at the moment, and it is no exaggeration to say that a ...ne awaits the man who can invent a really effective weapon with which ...ies will be able to cope with this new force in warfare. In the meantime some European army officers, who certainly cannot be accused of lack of originality, have been conducting experiments with a view to proving that eagles can be trained to destroy air fleets.

The idea was first suggested to them by the tragic fate of the late Galbraith Rogers, a brilliant aviator, who is said to have met his death because a sea gull accidentally flew against him and disturbed his control of his machine; and it has been subsequently proved that a very slight injury to the driver of an aëroplane will destroy his equilibrium and send him toppling to the earth.

If, argued the military officers, a small bird like a sea gull could demoralize an aviator, what would an eagle, which is powerful enough to carry off a sheep or child, do? The consequence was that some officers stationed at Nice, which is within a few miles of the alpine home of the Swiss eagle—recognized as one of the most powerful of birds—set to work to train six eagles to attack aëroplanes.

Machines resembling aëroplanes in shape, but supported by balloons, to which were attached pieces of meat, were sent up, and the eagles let loose. With fierce cries and flapping of wings they attacked the aëroplanes and tore the meat from them. In their eagerness they fought one another, and the aëroplanes were sometimes turned upside down in the struggles. It is inconceivable that any men in an aëroplane, even if there were three or four of them, could retain control of the machine in face of such an attack. One after another the eagles attacked all the aëroplane balloons, until they were wrecked, and their trainers felt certain that they would attack real aëroplanes with men in them with the same ferocity.

How will the aviators meet the attacks of the eagles? They will, of course, carry firearms of some kind—revolvers or short repeating rifles. To shoot a bird in the air is, however, notoriously difficult, but to shoot half a dozen of them while they are clawing at you and you are seated in a trembling aëroplane is well-nigh an impossibility.

Might Do for a Toy Soldier

OSCAR DELAMAIDE, who, although twenty-one years old, is only thirty inches high, was recently taken before the military council of Douai, France, and exempted from military service. His father took him to the council in a perambulator.

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