TWICE-A-MONTH

15 CENTS

IN CANADA 20¢

Top-Notch Magazine

Feb. 1, 1928

Lord of the High Places

A STORY OF SPEED DASH, THE HUMAN FLY

BY

Erle Stanley Gardner

Its friendly aid to teeth, appetite and digestion will help to keep the glow of health on little cheeks and on yours, too.

TOP-NOTCH

TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

Vol. LXXIII CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 1, 1928 Number 1

Complete Novel

Novelette

Shorter Stories

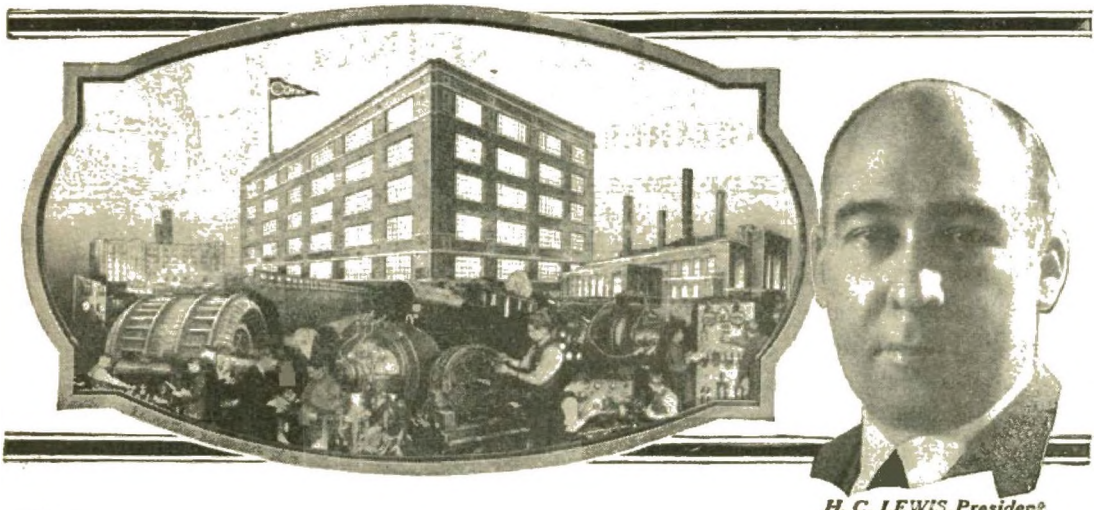
Serials

Tid-bits—Verse and Prose

Twice-a-month publication issued by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Copyright, 1928, by Street & Smith Corporation, New York. Copyright, 1928, by Street & Smith Corporation, Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, January 8, 1915, at the Post Office, New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, $3.70. Foreign, $4.40.

We do not hold ourselves responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.
All manuscripts must be addressed to the Editors.

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, $3.00 SINGLE COPIES, 15 CENTS
PUBLISHED ON 1st AND 15th NEXT NUMBER OUT FEBRUARY 15th



H. C. LEWIS, President

"I Will Train You To Get Into ELECTRICITY

In 12 Weeks ~On Actual Electrical Machinery"

Don't Waste Your Life in a Hopeless Job

Don't spend your life waiting for $5 raises in a dull, hopeless job. Let me show you how to qualify for jobs leading to salaries of $50, $60 and up, a week, in Electricity — NOT by correspondence, but by an amazing way to teach, that makes you a practical expert in 90 days! Getting into Electricity is far easier than you imagine!

Lack of Experience Bars No One

Any number of students enter my school knowing no more about electricity than an infant. And yet they graduate and go right out in the field and get electrical jobs leading to big pay.

Advanced Education Not Necessary

My method of training enables you to catch on instantly even though you have only had a common school education, without the use of dry books. You don't need advanced education to understand electricity the way I train.

Don't Worry About Age

Don't worry about your age. Plenty of men who never succeeded until late in life. This may be just the field you were cut out for.

Earn While You Learn

If you should need part time work, I'll assist you in getting it, if you will just write and tell me your circumstances. Many of my students pay all their living expenses through part time jobs secured by Coyne.

Actual Electrical Machinery

You work on real live electrical machinery, building real batteries, winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring real houses.

Prepare for Jobs Like These—

Armature Expert—$50 a Week and up
Substation Operator—$65 a Week
Inventor—Unlimited
Auto Electrician—$60 a Week and up
Maintenance Engineer—$60 a Week and up
Service Station Owner—$60 a Week and up
Radio Expert—$60 a Week and up

New $2,000,000 School

We are now in our new, fireproof, modern school wherein is installed thousands of dollars worth of the newest and most modern electrical equipment of all kinds.

The Greatest Industry

Electricity is THE FIELD. It is one of the youngest. Every day sees an increase in its use. It holds the greatest future. The young man of today who gets into Electricity lays the cornerstone for lasting success—prosperity.

Thorough Training

My training is so thorough that you will be able to step out and get a job leading to big pay. Hundreds of Coyne graduates testify as to the thoroughness of my course and that if it hadn't been for this thoroughness, they never would've been able to have held their jobs.

Fascinating Method of Learning

Maybe you don't think this method of training isn't fascinating. The instructor shows you how to do job No. 1. Then you do it. Then he shows you how to do job No. 2. Then you do it. After while you're building real batteries that generate real juice; you wind real armatures that actually work and you do complete house wiring jobs.

Every Possible Kind of Assistance

My organization is so thorough that you get every possible kind of assistance. We secure a clean room for you at the lowest rates. The welfare department looks after your comfort.

A Big 56 Page Book FREE!

Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 28 years old—Coyne training is tested—proven beyond all doubt—endorsed by many large electrical concerns. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, FREE Coyne Book.

"My Course Includes Training in Airplane ~ Electricity"

Not a Correspondence School

COYNE Electrical SCHOOL

H. C. LEWIS, Pres., Dept. 28-85 —Est. 1899

500 S. Paulina St., Chicago

Not a Correspondence School *but* An Institution To Which You Come for *Practical Training* on Real Electrical Machinery

Send for FREE Book!

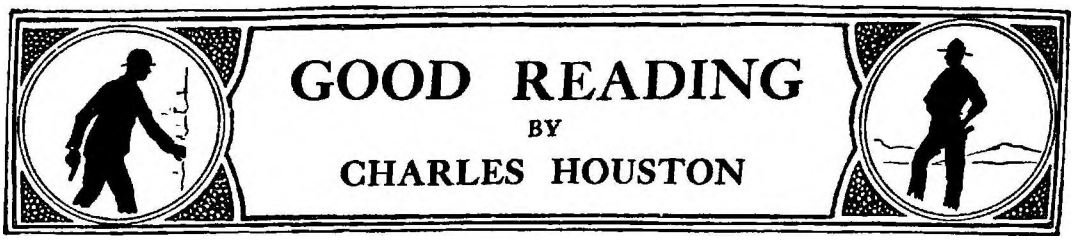
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL, Dept 28-85
H. C. Lewis, Pres. 500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Lewis: Without obligation send me your big free catalog and all details of Free Employment Service, Radio and Automotive Courses that are included and how many "earn while learning." I understand I will not be bothered by any salesman.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____



THERE is silence in the room. The man who is reading in the comfortable chair by the fireplace does not lift his head from the book. Through the half-opened window there comes now and then the distant wailing of a train, the sound of some belated automobile on the highroad, neighbors down the street calling good night.

So still and peaceful is this room, so quiet this reader, that one would never dream that in this very place there are wild alarms and excursions, that here indeed is the soul and center of high adventure.

To be sure, the desperate clash of armed men, the headlong pursuit of lovely maidens, ships foundering under heavy seas, horses thundering across the desolations of prairie land—all these exciting events are taking place in the active imagination of the inactive figure in the armchair. But to him, for the moment, they are reality itself. And that is the charm and the abiding lure of good fiction, that it can take a man or woman away from the routine of everyday surroundings and transport him or her to magic realms.

No one, no matter how sophisticated, how apparently unmoved by sentiment or emotion, can withstand this lure. The delights of a well-told story are democratic. They are shared by all sorts and varieties of people, in all walks of life.

Bankers and bricklayers, miners and manufacturers, Mrs. Vanderpoel of Park Avenue and Mrs. Higgins of Peoria, revel alike in the swift-moving stories told them by the masters of American fiction.

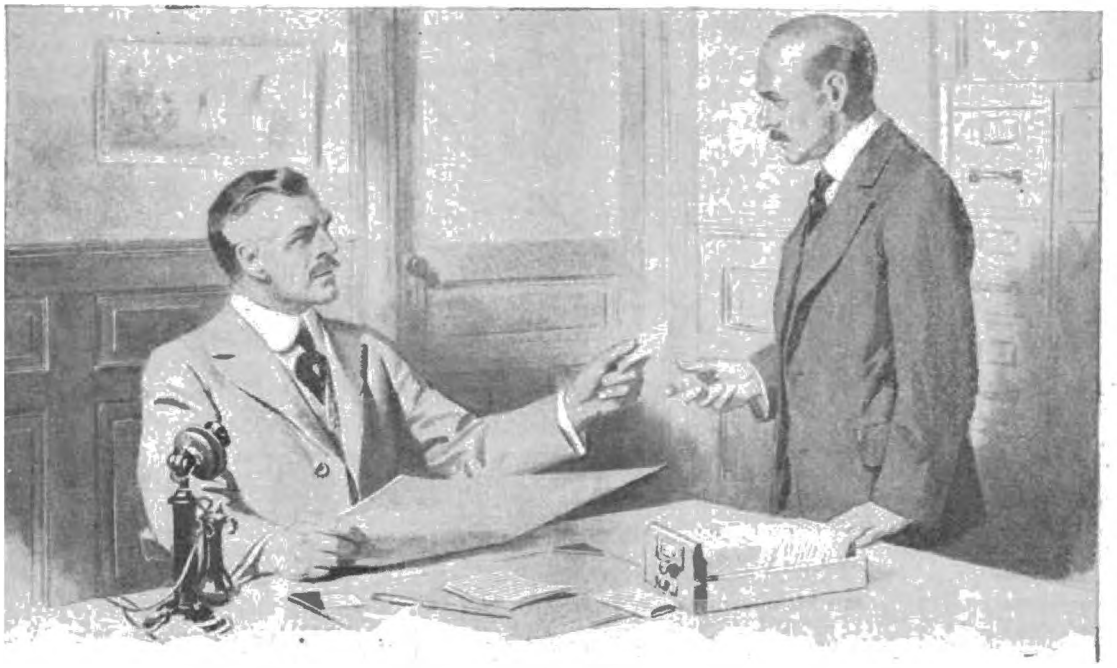
In New York, in a large building just beyond the edge of romantic Greenwich Village, is the clearing house for fiction that is typically American. One of the oldest and best-established publishing concerns in the country, Chelsea House, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City, is recognized from coast to coast as Good Reading Headquarters. Herewith are some of its very latest offers:

STRANGE TIMBER, an Adventure Story, by Joseph Montague. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

"Sam Strong came riding down the tide and
yelled his message plain,
'Go to it, boys! No jackstraw pile can best
the men of Maine!
'Go to it, boys! No jackstraw pile can best
the men of Maine!'"

On this crashing refrain of the deep-chested lumberjacks opens a story whose range swings from the Northland forests and the wind-swept dunes of the little sea village of Truro, down to the heat and clamor of a South American revolution.

Continued on 2nd page following



"Put Wagner on the Job!"

"I've been planning to promote him at the first opportunity. And now it's here. Watson hasn't been showing the interest in this business that I hoped he would and he's got to step down. Wagner, on the other hand, has been studying in spare time, with the International Correspondence Schools. They've been sending me his reports and I want to tell you he's doing fine. I've been watching him and he's ready. Put him in Watson's place and give him full charge of the department. And tell the cashier to see me about his salary."

Great news for Wagner. Too bad about Watson. But what can you expect?

When an executive hires a man or when he promotes a man, he can't afford to take chances. It's to his advantage to stand back of the man he feels sure will make good.

Suppose he has to choose between two men—one who is studying in his spare time and one who is not?

Isn't it natural to suppose that the ambitious man will be given the preference? It surely is! Recent events have proved it.

Our investigations show that the I. C. S. man is the first to be put on and the last to be discharged. Indeed, the thing that held the jobs of many men during the business depression was the fact that they were studying with the I. C. S.

For 35 years, the International Correspondence Schools have been helping men to win promotion and more money—to have happy, prosperous homes—to know the joy of getting ahead in business and in life.

No matter where you live, the I. C. S. will come to you. No matter what your handicaps or how small your means, we have a plan to meet your circumstances. No matter how limited your previous education, the simple, practical, wonderfully-illustrated I. C. S. lessons make it easy for you to learn.

All that we ask is this:—

Just mark and mail the coupon printed below, and without obligation or a penny of cost, let us send you the story of what the International Correspondence Schools can do for you.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University"

Box 2069-B, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject before which I have marked X in the list below:

BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

☐ Industrial Management	☐ Advertising
☐ Personnel Management	☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Traffic Management	☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
☐ Business Law	☐ Stenography and Typing
☐ Accounting and C.P.A. Coaching	☐ English
☐ Cost Accounting	☐ Civil Service
☐ Bookkeeping	☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Secretarial Work	☐ Common School Subjects
☐ Spanish ☐ French	☐ High School Subjects
☐ Salesmanship	☐ Illustrating ☐ Cartooning

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

☐ Electrical Engineering	☐ Architect
☐ Electric Lighting	☐ Architects' Blueprints
☐ Mechanical Engineer	☐ Contractor and Builder
☐ Mechanical Draftsman	☐ Architectural Draftsman
☐ Machine Shop Practice	☐ Concrete Builder
☐ Railroad Positions	☐ Structural Engineer
☐ Gas Engine Operating	☐ Chemistry ☐ Pharmacy
☐ Civil Engineer	☐ Automobile Work
☐ Surveying and Mapping	☐ Airplane Engines
☐ Metallurgy and Mining	☐ Agriculture ☐ Navigation
☐ Steam Engineering	☐ Mathematics ☐ Radio

Name.....

Street Address.....

City.....State.....

Occupation.....

Persons residing in Canada should send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

And, indeed, nothing did best the men of Maine, ashore or on the high seas. Their battles, and the struggle of their leader to success and the winning of the love of a girl of exceptional beauty and vitality, are elements in a story that is one of the best that has come from Mr. Montague's talented pen. Your dealer has "Strange Timber." Ask him for it on your way home to-night if you want to spend one of the most adventurous evenings of your life.

THE THUNDERBOLT'S JEST, a Detective Story, by Johnston McCulley. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

"Alias the Thunderbolt" made a hit with the reading public as sure and direct as the lightning from which its hero took his name. There arose instant demands for further chronicles of the adventures of John Flatchley and his faithful coworker, the ugly but dependable Mr. Saggs. And here, in "The Thunderbolt's Jest," is the thrilling answer to these demands. Once more we follow Flatchley and Saggs through a series of amazing adventures; once more we watch the cultured clubman change into the swift avenger who strikes terror to the hearts of cunning rogues—and then change back again. We can forgive the Thunderbolt his peculiar methods because he steals, not for the love of it, nor is he a criminal at heart. Why this man of means should steal, why he should resort to the ways of the denizens of the underworld, is revealed for those who have not met the Thunderbolt before in this gripping romance. Of course, if you already know the Thunderbolt, you will want to know him even better, and now Mr. McCulley gives you the long-awaited opportunity.

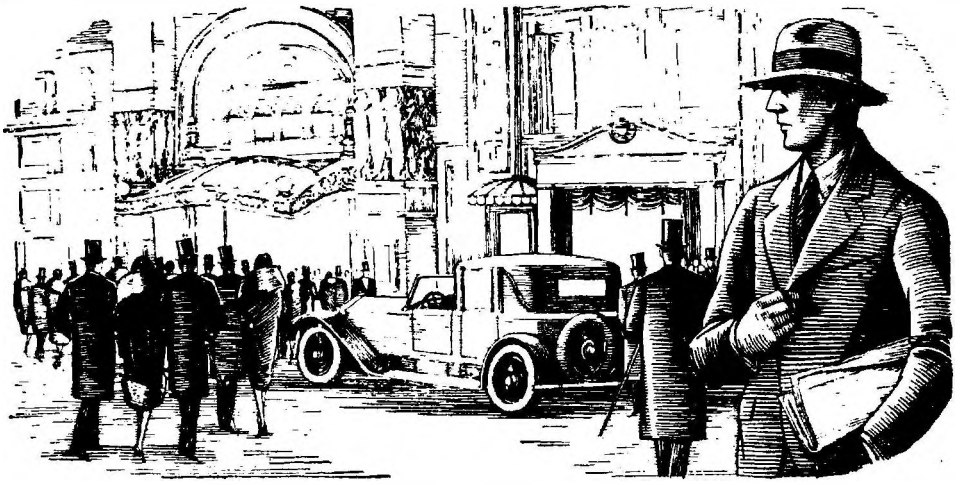
THE FLYING COYOTES, a Western Story, by Raymond S. Spears. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

Strange are the motives which animate the heart of an outlaw! Unexpectedly the good which is in the worst of us comes to the surface, and the bad man becomes an ally to the forces of law and order. Such was the case with "Short Joe" Fitzgammon, a member of the hard-riding, straight-shooting, "Flying Coyotes," a band of outlaws who long had terrorized peaceful citizens. One can well imagine the amazement of the sheriff when Short Joe stepped off his motor cycle and told him that he wanted to join the sheriff in hunting down members of the band of which his father had been a leader. There follows adventure aplenty, and there is a love story, too—one of the sort that is all too rare these days.

"The Flying Coyotes" is a book for men and women who love the West and its people.

ISLAND RANCH, a Western Story, by Thomas K. Holmes. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

When an oil prospector is in the neighborhood, you can bet your best Stetson things will begin to pop. Nothing much had been going on around Island Ranch until Aleck Carter, a man with a nose for oil, showed up. Things popped then, all right. There was a fortune and a girl at stake, and the winning of them both for a brave-hearted man. Believe us or not, once at the Island Ranch, you are in the midst of such adventure as will take you far away from routine cares and worries.



Always outside of things—that's where I was just twelve short months ago. I just didn't have the cash, that was all. No theatres, no parties, no good restaurants. No real enjoyment of life. I was just getting by, just existing. What a difference to-day! I drive my own car, have a good bank account, enjoy all the amusements I please.

I Couldn't Get The Good Things of Life

Then I Quit My Job and "Found" Myself!

HOW does a man go about making more money? If I asked myself that question once, I asked it a hundred times!

I know the answer now—you bet. I know the way good money is made, and I'm making it. Gone forever are the days of cheap shoes, cheap clothes, walking home to save carfare, pinching pennies to make my salary last from one pay-day to the next one. I own one of the finest Radio stores you ever saw, and I get almost all the Radio service and repair work in town. The other Radio dealers send their hard jobs to me, so you can see how I stand in my line.

But—it's just a year ago that I was a poorly-paid clerk. I was struggling along on a starvation salary, until by accident my eyes were opened and I saw just what was the matter with me. Here's the story of just how it happened.

ONE of the big moments of my life had come. I had just popped the fatal question, and Louise said "Yes!"

Louise wanted to go in and tell her father about it right away, so we did. He sort of grunted when we told him the news, and asked Louise to leave us alone. And my heart began to sink as I looked at his face.

"So you and Louise have decided to get married," he said to me when we were alone. "Well, Bill, just listen to me. I've watched you often here at the house with Louise and I think you are a pretty good, upstanding young fellow. I knew your father and mother, and you've always had a good reputation here, too. But just let me ask you just one question—how much do you make?"

"Twenty-eight a week," I told him.

He didn't say a word—just wrote it down on a piece of paper.

"Have you any prospects of a better job or a good raise sometime soon?" he asked.

"No, sir, I can't honestly say that I have," I admitted. "I'm looking for something better all the time, though."

"Looking, eh? How do you go about it?"

Well, that question stopped me.

How did I? I was willing to take a better job if I saw the chance all right, but I certainly had laid no plans to make such a job for myself. When he saw my confusion he grunted. "I thought so," he said, then he held up some figures he'd been scribbling at.

"I've just been figuring out your family budget, Bill, for a salary of twenty-eight a week. I've figured it several ways, so you can take your pick of the one you like best. Here's Budget No. 1. I figure you can afford a very small unfurnished apartment, make your payments on enough plain, inexpensive furniture to fix such an apartment up, pay your electricity, gas and water bills, buy just about one modest outfit of clothes for both of you once a year, and save three dollars a week for sickness, insurance and emergencies. But you can't eat. And you'll have to go without amusements until you can get a good substantial raise in salary."

I began to turn red as fire.

"That budget isn't so good after all," he said, glancing at me, "maybe Budget No. 2 will sound better—"

"That's enough, Mr. Sullivan," I said. "Have a heart. I can see things pretty clearly now, things I was kidding myself about before. Let me go home and think this over." And home I went, my mind in a whirl.

AT HOME I turned the problem over and over in my mind. I'd popped the question at Louise on impulse, without thinking it out. Everything Mr. Sullivan had said was gospel truth. I couldn't see anything to do, any way to turn. But I had to have more money.

I began to thumb the pages of a magazine which lay on the table beside me. Suddenly an advertisement seemed almost to leap out at my eyes, an advertisement telling of big opportunities for trained men to succeed in the great new Radio field. With the advertisement was a coupon offering a big free book full of information. I sent the coupon in, and in a few days received a handsome 64-page book, printed in two colors, telling all about the opportunities in the Radio field and how a man can prepare quickly and easily at home to take advantage of these opportunities. I read the book carefully, and when I finished it I made my decision.

What's happened in the twelve months since that day seems almost like a dream to me now. For ten of those twelve months, I've had a Radio business of my own! At first, of course, I started it as a little proposition on the side, under the guidance of the National Radio Institute, the institution that gave me my Radio training. It wasn't long before I was getting so much to do in the Radio line that I quit my measly little clerical job and devoted my full time to my Radio business.

Since that time I've gone right on up, always under the watchful guidance of my friends at the National Radio Institute. They would have given me just as much help, too, if I had wanted to follow some other line of Radio besides building my own retail business, such as broadcasting, manufacturing, experimenting, sea operating, or any one of the score of lines they prepare you for. And to think that until that day I sent for their eye-opening book, I'd been wailing "I never had a chance!"

Now, I'm making real money. Louise and I have been married six months, and there wasn't any kidding about budgets by Mr. Sullivan when we stepped off, either. I'll bet that today I make more money than the old boy himself.

Here's a real tip. You may not be as bad off as I was. But, think it over—are you satisfied? Are you making enough money, at work that you like? Would you sign a contract to stay where you are now for the next ten years, making the same money? If not, you'd better be doing something about it instead of drifting.

This new Radio game is a live-wire field of golden rewards. The work, in any of the 20 different lines of Radio, is fascinating, absorbing, well paid. The National Radio Institute—oldest and largest Radio home-study school in the world—will train you inexpensively in your own home to know Radio from A to Z and to increase your earnings in the Radio field.

Take another tip—No matter what your plans are, no matter how much or how little you know about Radio—clip the coupon below and look their free book over. It is Radio Institute, Dept. 2-A, Washington, D. C.

filled with interesting facts, figures, and photos, and the information it will give you is worth a few minutes of anybody's time. You will place yourself under no obligation—the book is free and is gladly sent to anyone who wants to know about Radio. Just address J. E. Smith, President, National

J. E. SMITH, President,
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 2-A, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith:

Please send me your 64-page free book, printed in two colors, giving all information about the opportunities in Radio and how I can learn quickly and easily at home to take advantage of them. I understand this request places me under no obligation, and that no salesmen will call on me.

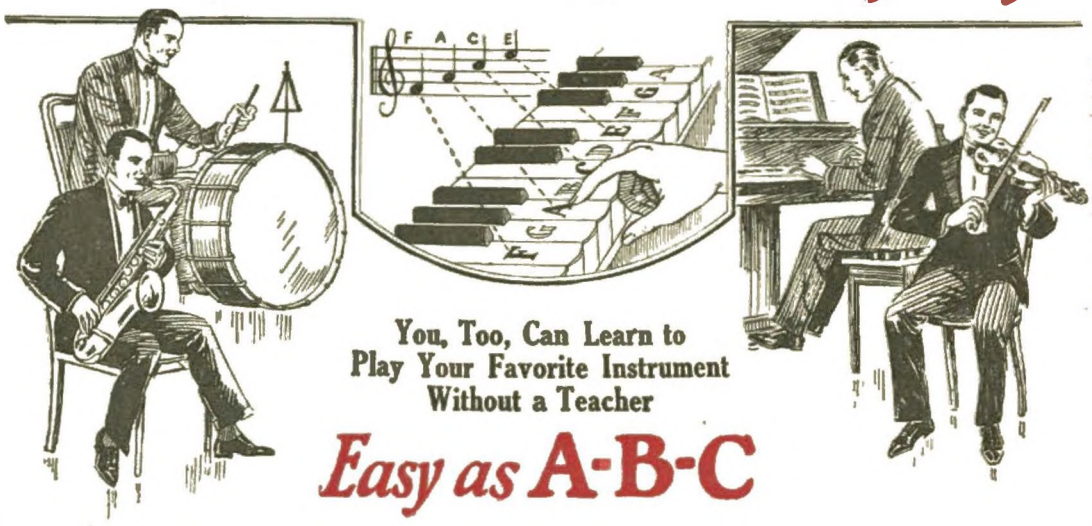
Name .....

Address .....

Town .....State .....

Half a Million People

have learned music this easy way



You, Too, Can Learn to Play Your Favorite Instrument Without a Teacher

Easy as A-B-C

YES, half a million delighted men and women all over the world have learned music this quick, easy way.

Half a million — 500,000 — what a gigantic orchestra they would make! Some are playing on the stage, others in orchestras, and many thousands are daily enjoying the pleasure and popularity of being able to play some instrument.

Surely this is convincing proof of the success of the *new, modern method* perfected by the U. S. School of Music! And what these people have done, YOU, too, can do!

Many of this half million didn't know one note from another—others had never touched an instrument—yet in half the usual time they learned to play their favorite instrument. Best of all, they found learning music *amazingly easy*. No monotonous hours of exercises—no tedious scales—no expensive teachers. This simplified method made learning music as easy as A-B-C!

It is like a fascinating game. From the very start you are playing *real* tunes, perfectly, by *note*. You simply can't go wrong, for every step, from beginning to end, is right before your eyes in print and picture. First you are *told* how to do a thing, then a picture *shows* you how, then you do it yourself and hear it. And almost before you know it, you are playing your favorite pieces—jazz, ballads, classics. No private teacher could make it clearer. Little theory—plenty of accomplishment. That's why students of the U. S. School of Music get ahead *twice as fast—three times as fast* as those who study old-fashioned, plodding methods.

What Instrument for You?

Piano	Hawaiian Steel Guitar
Organ	
Violin	
Clarinet	Drums and Traps
Flute	
Harp	Mandolin
Cornet	Harmony and Composition
'Cello	
Guitar	Sight Singing
Ukulele	Trombone
Saxophone	Piano Accordion
Piccolo	
Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor)	
Voice and Speech Culture	
Automatic Finger Control	

You don't need any special "talent." Many of the half million who have already become accomplished players never dreamed they possessed musical ability. They only wanted to play some instrument—just like you—and they found they could quickly learn how this easy way. Just a little of your spare time each day is needed—and you enjoy every minute of it. The cost is surprisingly low—averaging only a few cents a day—and the price is the same for whatever instrument you choose. And remember you are studying right in your own home—without paying big fees to private teachers.

Don't miss any more good times! Learn now to play your favorite instrument and surprise all your friends. Change from a wallflower to the center of attraction. Music is the best thing to offer at a party—musicians are invited everywhere. Enjoy the popularity you have been missing. Get your share of the musician's pleasure and profit! Start now!

Free Booklet and Demonstration Lesson

If you are in earnest about wanting to join the crowd of entertainers and be a "big hit" at any party—if you really *do* want to play your favorite instrument, to become a performer whose services will be in demand—fill out and mail the convenient coupon asking for our Free Booklet and Demonstration Lesson. These explain our wonderful method fully and show you how easily and quickly you can learn to play at little expense. Instruments are supplied when needed—cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 3592 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

U. S. School of Music,
3592 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

Please send me your free book, "Music Lessons in Your Own Home," with introduction by Dr. Frank Crane, Demonstration Lesson, and particulars of your offer. I am interested in the following course:—

.....

Have you above instrument?.....

Name.....
(Please Write Plainly)

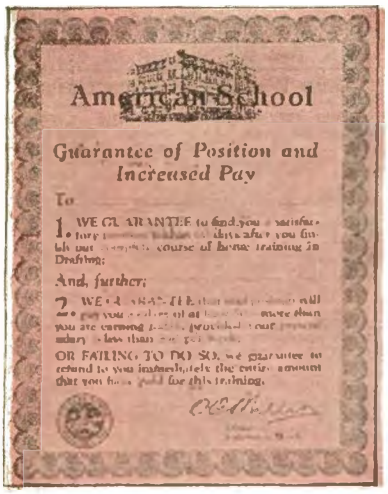
Address.....

City.....State.....

3 Drafting Lessons Actually free!

* Mail the Coupon

— to prove you can learn at Home, in spare time!



Home-training backed with an agreement to get you a DRAFTING JOB at a 50% RAISE—or money refunded

We have developed a new simplified, rapid way to teach Drafting, and we want to send you three sample lessons *without cost or obligation.* So you can test your own ability to master this fascinating work at home, in your spare time. And see for yourself how quickly and easily *you* can qualify for a fine well-paid Drafting position.

$50 to $125 a week paid to EXPERT DRAFTSMEN!

Pick up the want ads of any big-city newspaper and you'll see why we urge men to go into Drafting. 70,000 fine positions advertised in the past year. Draftsmen are urgently needed in Building Construction, Manufacturing, in the Architectural, Mechanical, Electrical, Structural and Automotive industries. Get in touch with me, and I'll tell you how *you* can get one of these fine jobs.

Come Into Drafting!

The ability to read blueprints and draw plans is the entering wedge to success in all building and manufacturing lines. Learn Drafting and you'll be "sitting pretty." It's INTERESTING work and Draftsmen are a wonderful bunch of fellows. You're bound to enjoy the good natured atmosphere of a Drafting office and the contact it gives you with important activities and BIG MEN.

Here is a word-for-word copy of the Contract which we have made with 30,000 men in the past three years. I shall be glad to make the same agreement, backed by our entire resources of $2,000,000.00—with YOU.

This agreement proves our training does make *real Draftsmen.* It proves that after you finish, *there are well-paid jobs available.* And you can prepare yourself without losing a day's pay or time, without quitting your job or leaving home!

O. C. MILLER
Director Extension Work

The American School

Chartered 30 years ago as an EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION, and, like the best resident schools and colleges, conducted NOT FOR PROFIT. We offer complete, thorough, up-to-date *instruction* — prepared by 200 leading Engineers, Executives and Educators. A unique instruction, built to meet the specifications of well-paid jobs as laid down by employers themselves—yet simplified for ready understanding by men with only common schooling.

The American School

Dept. D-24 Drexel Avenue at 58th Street, Chicago

O. C. MILLER, Director, Extension Work ★
The American School, Dept. D-24
Drexel Ave. & 58th St., Chicago

I am interested to get particulars of your Job and Raise Guarantee. Also send 3 Drafting Lessons without cost or obligation.

Name _____

Address _____

Age _____ Occupation _____

Classified Advertising

Agents and Help Wanted

AGENTS: $13.80 Daily (In Advance) Spare time will do. Introduce 12 months Guaranteed Hosiery. 57 styles, 39 colors, for Men, Women, Children; including latest "Silk to the Top" Ladies' Hose. No capital or experience needed. We furnish samples. Silk hose for your own use free. New Plan. Macochee Hosiery Company, Park 4502, Cincinnati, Ohio.

BIG MONEY AND FAST SALES. Every owner buys gold initials for his auto. You charge $1.50, make $1.35. Ten orders daily easy. Write for particulars and free samples. American Monogram Co., Dept. 176, East Orange, N. J.

AGENTS—$60-$125 A WEEK. Free samples. Gold letters for stores and office windows. Metallic Letter Co., 428 N. Clark, Chicago.

WE START YOU WITHOUT A DOLLAR, Soaps, Extracts, Perfumes, Toilet Goods. Experience unnecessary. Carnation Co., Dept. 2860, St. Louis, Mo.

AGENTS—WE START YOU IN BUSINESS and help you succeed. No capital or experience needed. Spare or full time. You can earn $50-$100 weekly. Write Madison Manufacturers, 564 Broadway, New York.

WE START YOU IN BUSINESS, furnishing everything; men and women $30 to $100 weekly operating our "Specialty Candy Factories" anywhere. Booklet free. W. Hillyer Ragsdale, Drawer 29, East Orange, N. J.

OUR SUPERIOR PROPOSITION will net you $100 a week, every week in the year. Equipment and car furnished. No capital or experience necessary. Immediate profits. Write today for particulars. American Products Company, 1673 Monmouth, Cincinnati, O.

SALESMEN SELLING TO MEN: We have side line for you that will sell along with any line you may now be handling and make more money for you, provided you are now selling to men. Get full facts at once. Address Salesmanager, 841 West Adams, Dept. 314, Chicago.

$14.50 DAILY EASY—PAY IN ADvance. Introducing Chieftain Guaranteed Shirts 3 for $4.95. No experience or capital needed. Just write orders. We deliver and collect. Full working outfit Free. Cincinnati Shirt Company, Shop 1922, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Agents and Help Wanted—*Continued*

YOU ARE WANTED TO RESILVER Mirrors at Home. Immense profits plating auto parts, tableware, etc. Write for information. Sprinkle, Plater, 333, Marion, Indiana.

Business Opportunities

EARNEST SEEKER—remunerative, worthy business, differs from commercial lines, no stocks of merchandise. Small capital, information free. Paul Kaye, 149 Broadway, New York.

Coins, Stamps, etc.

OLD MONEY WANTED. Will pay Fifty Dollars for nickel of 1913 with Liberty head, (no Buffalo). We pay cash premiums for all rare coins. Send 4c for Large Coin Folder. May mean much profit to you. Numismatic Co., Dept. 440, Ft. Worth, Tex.

How to Entertain

PLAYS, Musical comedies and revues, minstrel music, blackface skits, vaudeville acts, monologs, dialogs, recitations, entertainments, musical readings, stage handbooks, make-up goods. Big catalog free. T. S. Denison & Co., 623 So. Wabash, Dept. 132, Chicago.

Patents and Lawyers

PATENTS. Send sketch or model for preliminary examination. Booklet free. Highest references. Best results. Promptness assured. Watson E. Coleman, Patent Lawyer, 724 Ninth St., Washington, D. C.

INVENTIONS COMMERCIALIZED. Patented or unpatented. Write Adam Fisher Mfg. Co., 223, Enright, St. Louis, Mo.

PATENTS—Write for Guide Books and "Record of Invention Blank" before disclosing inventions. Send model or sketch of invention for Inspection and Instructions Free. Terms reasonable. Victor J. Evans Co., 767 Ninth, Washington, D. C.

INVENTORS—Write for our guide book, "How to Get Your Patent," and evidence of invention blank. Send model or sketch for Inspection and Instructions Free. Terms reasonable. Randolph & Co., Dept. 413, Washington, D. C.

Farm Lands

MONEY MADE IN MICH. POTATOES. $10, down now and easy terms buys land near markets, lakes, streams. Write today. Swigart & Co., S-1276, 1st Nat'l Bank Bldg., Chicago.

Help Wanted—Female

$6-$18 A DOZEN decorating pillow tops at home, experience unnecessary; particulars for stamp. Tapestry Paint Co., 110 La-Grange, Ind.

Male Help—Instructions

MEN, GET FOREST RANGER JOB; $125-$200 mo. and home furnished; permanent; hunt, fish, trap. For details write Norton, 268 Temple Court, Denver, Colo.

EARN $120 to $250 monthly, expenses paid as Railway Traffic Inspector. We secure position for you after completion of 3 months' home-study course or money refunded. Excellent opportunity. Write for Free Booklet, CM-28, Stand. Business Training Inst., Buffalo, N. Y.

MAIL CARRIERS—CLERKS. $1700-$2300. Men 18-45. Many February Examinations. Particulars free. Franklin Institute, Dept W2, Rochester, N. Y.

Help Wanted—Instructions

MEN WANTING OUTDOOR WORK, qualify for forest ranger position. Start $125 month; cabin and vacation; patrol the forests, protect the game; give tourists information. Write Mokane, Dept. M-10, Denver, Colo.

ALL MEN-WOMEN, 18-55, wanting Government positions, commence $110-$250 month, write for Free copy "How to Qualify." Instruction Bureau, 308 Arcade Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

Detectives—Instructions

MEN—Experience unnecessary; travel; make secret investigations; reports; salaries; expenses. Write American Foreign Detective Agency, 114, St. Louis, Mo.

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. Great demand. Excellent opportunity. Experience unnecessary. Particulars free. Write, George Wagner, 2190 Broadway, New York.

Sell Us Your Spare Time

Probably you can think of a score of things right now for which you would like to have some extra money—a home of your own, a car, a college education. Any of these is within your grasp if you simply follow the successful course of thousands of men and women, boys and girls, who are turning their spare time into cash taking subscriptions for our magazines.

EASY TO START

The same plan that has made these folks prosperous is now offered to you. No experience, no capital necessary. Does not interfere with your regular duties. Try it out! It costs only a 2c. stamp, or a penny post card to get full details and a complete money-making outfit FREE. You have nothing to lose and may gain hundreds of dollars—here's the coupon.

MAIL IT TO-DAY!

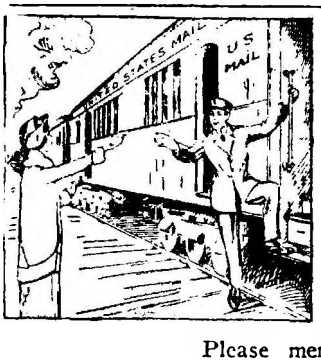
STREET & SMITH CORPORATION
79-89 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y.

Please show me how I can profitably sell you my spare time.

NAME .....

STREET .....

CITY .....STATE .....



Travel—For "Uncle Sam"

RAILWAY POSTAL CLERKS—MEN—BOYS 18 UP

CARRIERS—POSTOFFICE CLERKS
PROHIBITION AGENTS

$1700 TO $3000 YEAR

Steady Work No Layoffs
Many Government Jobs Open to Women
Common Education Sufficient
MAIL COUPON IMMEDIATELY

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE,
Dept. W-276, Rochester, N. Y.

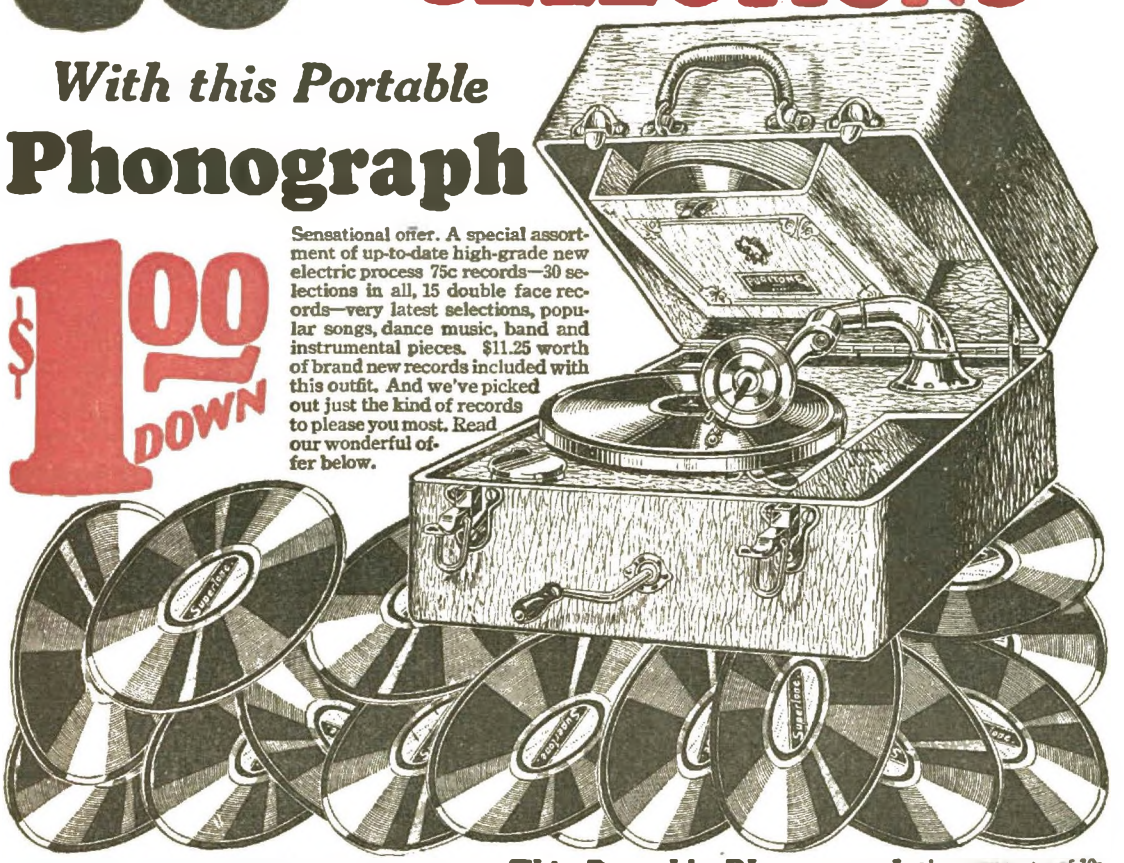
Sirs: Rush to me without charge, 32-page book with (1) Full information regarding Railway Postal Clerks; City Carriers; Postoffice Clerks; Prohibition Agents; (2) List of government jobs now open to men and women, 18 up; (3) Full particulars telling how to get a position.

Name .....

Address .....

30 UP-TO-DATE SELECTIONS

With this Portable Phonograph



$1.00 DOWN

Sensational offer. A special assortment of up-to-date high-grade new electric process 75c records—30 selections in all, 15 double face records—very latest selections, popular songs, dance music, band and instrumental pieces. $11.25 worth of brand new records included with this outfit. And we've picked out just the kind of records to please you most. Read our wonderful offer below.

30 Days Trial Yes, we will send this Puritone portable phonograph outfit, with 30 high grade selections, 15 double face 75c records to your home on 30 days trial for only $1.00 with the coupon. Use it as your own and see what a wonderful convenience it is to have a phonograph that you can carry from room to room. Use the outfit on 30 days trial. If within 30 days you decide not to keep the outfit, send it back and we'll refund your $1.00 plus all transportation charges.

$2.60 a month If you keep it, pay only $2.60 a month until you have paid—only $26.85. Think of it, a first-class high grade phonograph, and 15 high grade up-to-date double face records—(30 selections) a complete outfit, ready to play, only $26.85.

This Portable Phonograph plays any make of 10-inch disc records including Edison and plays two ten-inch records with one winding. Weighs only 17 pounds. Comes in waterproof imitation leather case with hinged lid, closes up like a small suitcase with snap locks and carrying handle (see illustration.) Measures 14½ x 7½ inches. Records are placed inside of lid and secured so they will not rattle or break. Holds 15 records. Has quiet spring motor, tone arm and reproducer with indestructible diaphragm and wide throat for full sound volume. Reproducer is reversible for Edison records. Outfit includes 15 double face 75c *New Electric Process* records—30 selections. A complete record library without buying a single one! Shpg. weight, packed about 25 lbs.

Order by No. W8824JA; only $1.00 with coupon, $2.60 monthly Total price $26.85.

Send Coupon Now

Seize this opportunity on this special sale, while it lasts.

FREE CATALOG *of home furnishings sent with or without order. See coupon.*

Only $1.00 with the coupon brings the complete outfit on 30 days trial.

Straus & Schram, Dept. 3982 CHICAGO, ILL.

Straus & Schram, Dept. 3982 Chicago, Ill.

Enclosed find $1.00. Ship special advertised Puritone Portable Phonograph with 15 Double Face 75c *New Electric Process* records—30 selections. I am to have 30 days free trial. If I keep the outfit I will pay you $2.60 monthly. If not satisfied, I am to return the phonograph and records within 30 days and you are to refund my dollar and express charges I paid.

Puritone Portable Phonograph and 15 Double Face Records, W8824JA, $26.85

Name _____

St., R. F. D. or Box No. _____

Shipping Point _____

Post Office _____ *State* _____

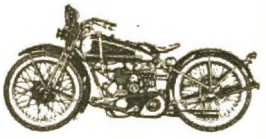
Married or Single? _____ *Nationality or Color* _____

If you want ONLY our free catalog of home furnishings, mark X here. ☐

Glorious Sports for Real Sports!

SKIING, skating, tobogganing — Winter's sports challenge you to ride out and join them in your Harley-Davidson.

Winter days and winter trails have no terrors for this motorcycle. It has a world of power and thrilling speed. No radiator troubles! Running cost only 2¢ per mile!



The famous Single—the solo motorcycle that travels 80 miles on one gallon of gas—1c per mile operating cost. Only $235. f.o.b. factory, with complete electric equipment.

The 1928 models have both front and rear brakes, and many other improvements. Ask your dealer about his Pay-As-You-Ride Plan. Mail coupon for catalog.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTOR COMPANY
Dept. AF, Milwaukee, Wis.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON
Motorcycles

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTOR CO.,
Dept. AF, Milwaukee, Wis.
Send catalog and literature describing ☐ Twin ☐ Single.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____

On time!

New Model

Pocket Ben

A reliable watch will help you be on time.

The New Model Pocket Ben is that kind—thoroughly trustworthy.

It's goodlooking, too—and sturdy as they make them.

Sold everywhere for $1.50. With luminous dial that tells time in the dark, $2.25.

Built by the makers of Big Ben and other Westclox

WESTERN CLOCK COMPANY
La Salle, Illinois

This Singular Book Wields a Strange Power Over Its Readers

Giving them a MAGNETIC PERSONALITY almost instantly!

Will You Read It 5 Days FREE—to Prove It Can Multiply *Your* Present Income?

A STRANGE book! A book that seems to cast a spell over every person who turns its pages!

A copy of this book was left lying on a hotel table for a few weeks. Nearly 400 people saw the book—read a few pages—and then *sent for a copy!*

In another case a physician placed a copy in his waiting-room. More than 200 patients saw the book—read part of it—and then *ordered copies for themselves!*

Why are people so profoundly affected by this book?—so anxious to get a copy? The answer is simple. The book reveals to them for the first time how any one can develop a Magnetic Personality *instantly!* It explains how to gain *overnight* the personal charm that attracts countless friends—the self-confidence that insures quick success in any business.

It tells how to draw people to you at once, irresistibly—how to be popular in any society—how to overcome almost at once any timidity you may have—how to be a magnet of human attraction, well-liked wherever you go!

Book Tells You

How to develop a Magnetic Personality
How to use certain Oriental Secrets
How to gain perfect nerve control
How to read people's feelings by watching their mouths
How to read people's thoughts by watching their eyes
How to develop a magnetic eye
How to make your face appear 20 years younger
How to control others by a glance
How to use Magnetic Healing
How to end awkwardness and timidity
How to attract the opposite sex
How to get ahead in your business or profession
How to make your subconscious mind work wonders
And dozens of other vital topics

Best of all it tells you how to accomplish these results *instantaneously!*

Whence Comes This Uncanny Volume?

Forty years ago, Edmund Shaftesbury, student of the human mind, set out to discover the secret of Personal Magnetism. He applied his discoveries to his friends. Results were astonishing! His methods seemed to transform people into *entirely new beings!* Shaftesbury's fame spread. Great men came to him. His students and friends embraced such names as Gladstone, Queen Victoria, Edwin Booth, Henry Ward Beecher, and Cardinal Gibbons.

Until recently, Shaftesbury's teachings have been available only to people who could pay $25 or $50 each for instruction books. Now, his wonderful teachings have been collected into a single volume, at a price *within the reach of all!* And furthermore, Shaftesbury has consented to reveal hundreds of new discoveries never before put into print.

Strange Effect on Readers

Readers of this book quickly become masters of a singular power to influence men and women around them. Not by force—not by loud argument. But rather by some subtle, insinuating power that sways men's emotions. They are able to play on people's feelings just as a skilled violinist plays upon a violin.

Is it any wonder that thousands of men and women say that they are overjoyed with the results they have received? One enthusiast said of this volume, "Things I have read there I would never have dreamed of." Another wrote, "I would not give up what Shaftesbury has taught me for $100,000!"

In your everyday life—in social life—you will find this book of immense value. You will learn to fascinate people you meet—to attract new friends—to gain speedy promotion in business.

Read This Book 5 Days Free

Merely mail the coupon below and this remarkable volume, with cover in handsome dark burgundy cloth, gold embossed, will be sent you for free examination. If you aren't stirred and inspired in the 5-day free period, return it and it costs you nothing. Otherwise keep it as your own and remit the Special Price of only $3 in full payment. This volume was originally published to sell at $5, but in order to reach many readers it is being offered at reduced price. You risk nothing—so clip and mail this coupon NOW. Ralston University Press, Dept. 86-B, Meriden, Conn.

RALSTON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Dept. 86-B, Meriden, Conn.

All right—I'll be the judge. You may send me the volume "Instantaneous Personal Magnetism" for 5 days' FREE EXAMINATION in my home. Within the 5 days I will either remit the special low price of only $3, in full payment, or return it without cost or obligation.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... *State* .....

Do your hands say nice things about you . . . *always?*

As a prominent beauty editor said recently, "Hands are inveterate tattletales . . . make them say nice things about you."

They can, you know—no matter even if they must perform a dozen soap-and-water tasks every day!

Perhaps you know that harsh soap is your hands' greatest enemy. It parches away their beauty. No lotions or creams can bring that beauty back so long as you use harsh soap.

But if you use Ivory whenever you use soap—in washing your gleaming china and silver, in cleansing the clothes—its purity will protect your hands just as it protects lovely complexions. They will stay smooth and white and lovely—for any occasion—because Ivory is kind and gentle! PROCTER & GAMBLE

Ivory Soap

KIND TO EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES

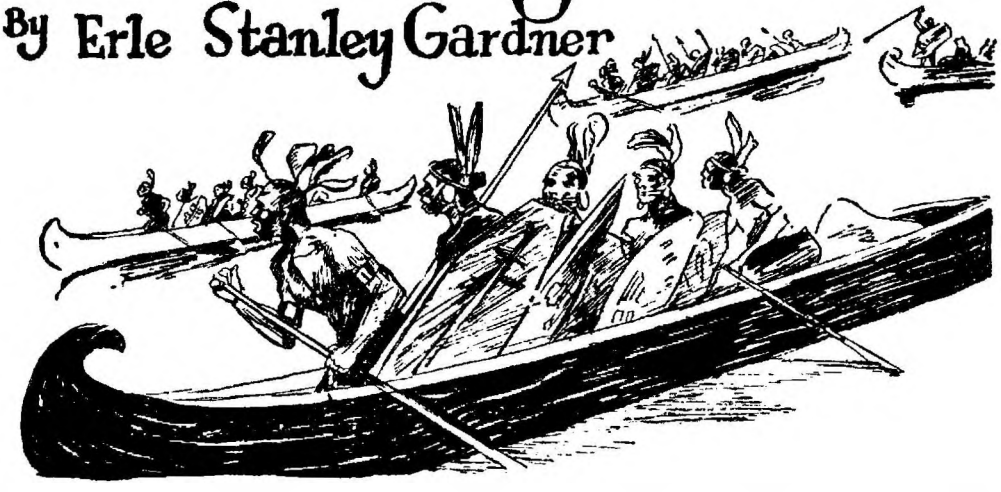
99 44/100 % pure . It floats

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

Vol. LXXIII Published February 1, 1928 No. 1

Lord of the High Places

By Erle Stanley Gardner



A Story of Speed Dash, the Human Fly

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

COMMISSIONS TO GO ABROAD.

SLENDER, dark, furtive, the man paused before the door of the office marked "Richard Dash—Results." He heaved a sigh as though he were gathering his forces for some supreme effort, and stepped inside. As he paused before the door there had been an ominous something in his expression, but as he walked into the outer office his face was wreathed in smiles. The oily, unctuous smiles were those of a man who seeks to convince another, to ingratiate himself to his own advantage.

Seated before the man in the inner office, something of the bland smirk left the face of the visitor. It was hard to hold a pose before "Speed" Dash.

"I am José Gallardo," he said, extending a slim, brown hand, "and I have, of course, the honor of addressing Speed Dash, the man who accomplishes results, who overlooks no detail, the man who never fails. The question, Señor Dash, is whether you will undertake an employment where your very life will depend upon your ability to overlook no single detail, no slightest clew."

Speed Dash stretched, yawned, and grinned.

"G'wan an' make your proposition," he said.

It was characteristic of Speed Dash

that at times he reverted to the easy, slurring dialect which had been his mode of speech for many years. Educated with side shows and circus men as a youth, he had graduated into that most difficult of all acrobats, a "human fly."

By no other means than his bare fingers he had scaled the sides of towering skyscrapers, holding himself suspended by his fingers, cultivating an iron will and ice-cold nerve. His early education had been a creed of self-reliance, learned while he hung over the heads of open-mouthed crowds, making his living at the most dangerous profession the world has ever known.

Then had come a day when a professor of psychology, in search of some absolutely fearless individual who would be a fit subject for a series of remarkable experiments in the development of perceptional powers, had picked upon Speed Dash. The training had been unique, based upon a cultivation of the subconscious. A weaker man could not have stood it. A less determined individual would have failed, but Speed Dash had emerged from the training with a photographic memory.

His eyes took in details and registered them upon his brain as the lens of a motion picture camera registers impressions upon reels of sensitized film. And Speed could reverse his mental processes at will, and reel back the memory scenes, recalling each and every detail, no matter how trivial. It had been only natural that Speed should have turned this wonderful accomplishment to the detection of crime. In the course of a few months, he had made his name a source of terror to organized criminals throughout the land.

José Gallardo let his beady eyes rest upon the features of the young detective for a few moments, and then, with a shrug of the shoulders, reached in his pocket and abstracted a leather wallet.

"My proposition is made in a language that all men understand," he said, and his smile changed to a smirk as his tapering, brown fingers flipped bill after bill onto the desk. Yellow-backed bills they were, which spoke crisply of the power of money.

Speed watched the man through eyes that were narrowed to mere slits. He made no move to pick up the oblong, gold-backed currency which fluttered to the desk.

"I'm listenin'," he said.

The fingers hesitated, paused, poised, and the thin face of Jose Gallardo leaned forward.

"Señor, it is a commission to a distant land. Buenos Aires, señor. There I have a sister who is in need of your protection. Much have I heard of the great powers of the Señor Dash.

"You are feared by the criminals, envied by the police. You are unique. There is no one like you, never will be. See, señor, here is your ticket. The boat sails within an hour. Money is no object. It is my beloved sister who is in danger, and you shall fly to her assistance."

The man paused, and Speed's eyes took in every detail, watched the nervous fingers. They were now twisting the gold watch chain into a series of interlocking loops.

"There is a man who has much power, much influence, and he would destroy my sister, steal our property, take from us that which is ours. Because of the power that this man wields there is no person who dares to cross him. You are brave señor, and you are resourceful. You will accomplish results where others have failed."

"Yeah," drawled Speed, "and you expect me to go into a strange country where I don't even speak the language, an' put the Indian sign on a bird that's sittin' on top of the government?"

The other nodded eagerly. "But surely. It is said of you that there is nothing impossible, nothing that you do not dare, nothing that you cannot do."

The nimble fingers had abandoned the watch chain and were toying with a piece of string which lay upon the table, twisting and tying it into swift knots.

"Are you going with me?" asked Speed.

"No, no, señor. It is my terror of the ocean. I am made sick by the motion of the waves. I can never bear the thought of water. My sister is dearer to me than my life, but not for my life, not for ten thousand lives would I endure the motion, the continual heaving, rising, and falling—bah, I cannot even think of it!"

Speed suddenly laughed and pushed back the money. "Run along, captain, run along and roll your hoop!"

The other jumped to his feet. "Captain! You call me captain! You tell me that you will not work for me, that you are not going to the rescue of my sister?"

Speed nodded, and his dark eyes suddenly glowed with a lambent flame. "Yeah, that's what I said, an' that's what I meant. I don't know what the game is, but you're an officer on a small boat, an' all this talk about seasickness is the bunk. You've been tying clove hitches with a double loop, makin' bowlines with an overhand twist, and makin' mooring knots around your finger.

"There's a mark over the bridge of your nose where the vizor of a marine officer's cap catches you and marks the border of your sunburn. There's a watch charm that's in the form of a gold wheel with the name of a boat on it. Your walk shows you haven't got your land legs yet, and there's a dozen and one things that show me you're captain of a small boat.

"They don't use clove hitches on the big ones any more, and that way of tying a bowline comes from a sailor. Aw, shucks! what's the use? You're trying to get me to play into your hands for some reason, an' life's too short. Beat it!"

The reddish-brown eyes of his visitor widened with incredulous amazement. The string dropped from his fingers, the brown hand scooped up the pile of bills. Without a word, he darted from the office—a surreptitious something in his manner, an undue haste to his steps.

Speed knitted his brows. "Now why in thunder did that bird want to impress me that he was a landlubber?" he asked himself. "I had half a mind to play into his hand, and find out what the game was about."

For a few moments Speed speculated, then shrugged his shoulders and turned to the pile of mail. Half an hour passed and then the telephone rang. A feminine voice, soft, purring, yet with a softness which was merely a veneer over harsher accents, cooingly inquired whether Mr. Dash would be at liberty to accept employment which would take him to London at once. There was to be a fee of five thousand dollars.

Speed grinned into the transmitter. "Come on up and bring the money," he said.

"This is Mrs. Arthur Battleboro," continued the cooing voice, "and I will be up within an hour."

"All right," said Speed, "only remember I ain't retained until you get here.

"My busy morning for out of town stuff," he remarked as he hung up the receiver, and turned to greet his secretary who stood in the doorway, eyes large, round, voice hushed, awed.

"Miss Leta Danforth," announced the girl, "Miss Danforth, herself, *the* Miss Danforth," she added as she saw no look of awe come to the face of her employer.

Speed scowled. "And who's *the* Miss Danforth?" he asked.

The girl sighed. "You know everything and everybody, except the really worth while things. Miss Danforth is the heiress who's all the rage this season. Her picture's always on the front

page of the Sunday society supplement. She's got millions in money and billions in looks."

Speed looked at his watch and scowled. "Tell her she can come in, but I probably can't take on anything new right now. I may be leaving for London in a short time."

The girl nodded and withdrew, her eyes glowing with enthusiasm at the thought of speaking to the darling of society.

Miss Leta Danforth sized Speed Dash up with slightly arching brows. To those who did not know the detective, his obvious youth was always the cause of some surprise. Slender, dark, wiry, he showed no trace of the tremendous strength of hardened sinews which had enabled him to carry on his former profession.

A peculiar alertness of manner, an effortless rhythm of motion when he changed position, gave some indication of mental and physical alertness, but were in sharp contrast to the bulging muscles which most of his clients expected him to display.

"Well?" asked Speed, arising and indicating a chair.

The girl hesitated.

"I had expected an older man," she said; "perhaps after all—perhaps I had better not take your time."

CHAPTER II.

PART OF THE PARCHMENT CHART.

IT was characteristic of Speed that he always sought to show his independence in the presence of persons of wealth and position. At times he seemed positively rude to them, so eager was he to retain his individuality, and this accounted for a certain brusqueness in his manner.

Had the girl before him been a stenographer she would have found Speed Dash courteously attentive. Because she was the pampered favorite of the higher class of society, she found Speed's manner rather short, his words crisp and to the point.

"Suit yourself, Miss Danforth. I can't control my looks. If you feel I can be of service, don't hesitate to speak up. Otherwise don't hesitate to leave. It's simply a business proposition, you know."

Strangely, his words did not seem to offend the girl. Rather, his crisp manner somehow reassured her, and she flashed him a quick smile, then took the chair he had indicated.

"Very well, Mr. Dash. As you say, it's purely a matter of business, after all. Tell me, is there any employment which you bar? Anything, that is, which is honorable, but which might perhaps prove too dangerous, too adventurous, too bizarre?"

Speed grinned and shook his head. He was commencing to like this girl with the fresh eyes and the boyish figure who spoke straight from the shoulder and looked him square in the eyes.

The girl opened her vanity case, darted swift fingers into a silk compartment and produced a piece of yellow, spotted parchment. This she flipped over to Speed.

The detective looked at it curiously, then looked again at the girl before him.

"Evidently an old chart showing an island," he said.

She nodded, her gray eyes containing a mischievous, mocking twinkle.

"Buried treasure?" asked Speed.

His tone was that of light banter, as though he were merely making an obvious joke, but the girl nodded again, her eyes still twinkling.

"Really?" asked Speed, his forehead puckering.

She smiled, leaned forward and the words came suddenly pouring forth.

"I know it sounds crazy, but that's why I like it. If you could have any idea of the dreadful monotony of being a social favorite. I'm so sick and tired

of card parties, dances and receptions I could scream every time I think of one of them. There's nothing a girl can do any more except listen to the false protestations of fortune hunters, and talk social nothings. I'm fed up on it all!

"And then I met Doris Valencia, and her brother, Ramon. It seems that they have come into possession of a document that dates back more than a hundred years; and it's authentic. It's been in their family for generations, but it's been in code and no one could decipher it.

"Finally, Ramon decoded the old document, and it's a confession by a dying pirate, the great-great grandfather of Ramon and Doris. Oh, it's a long story and one I can't go into now; but they want me to finance a trip after this treasure, and they offer me a full one half if I'll only defray the expenses of getting to the island. It's one of the Solomons."

The girl broke off with a laugh. "It sounds so crazy sitting here in the office of a skyscraper and telling you all this," she said, after a moment, "but you can't understand. I feel life is so empty, so worthless here, and I want adventure, not just the sort of travel a tourist gets, but the kind of adventure that comes to people who are really living, doing things worth while."

Speed nodded. "Yes," he remarked, "I can imagine how I would feel if I were living the life of a social butterfly."

Something in his tone made her flush. "And that's what I want to get away from," she stated, her gray eyes looking straight into his dark ones. "They have made a condition that I am to let no one know where or when I am going, nor for what purpose—and, I do not entirely trust them."

Speed glanced at her sharply. "And you came to me to get my opinion as to their honesty?"

The gray eyes lowered swiftly for a moment, then the lashes swept up and she met his gaze.

"No. I came to you because I wanted you to go along. I reserved the privilege to take some one person with me. Of course, I had fancied that you were a much older man. I had read of your ability and of the numerous mysteries you had successfully solved. My attorney made some investigation of your character—that's why I'm here this morning."

"And you still wish me to accompany you?"

"Yes."

Speed thought for a moment.

"What will be the expenses of the trip? How much are you supposed to advance to cover the trip to this island, in other words what is the consideration for which you are to be given a half interest in this treasure?"

Her arched brows raised slightly and her shoulder shrugged. "I'm sure I don't know exactly. You'll understand that money means but very little to me. My parents are dead, and they left me more than enough—left me too much, in fact. That's the trouble. However, I believe Mr. Valencia said the total cost would not exceed three thousand dollars. They are virtually penniless, otherwise they would not let any one else in on it."

Speed nodded gravely. "And it is a condition that you are not to let any one know where you are going?"

"Yes. They insist that there are others who know of the existence of the chart and the document,. others who would follow and seek to take possession of the treasure by force. They make it a condition that I shall simply disappear, leave my friends to wonder what has happened to me. Oh, you'll see big headlines in the paper, 'Society Girl Disappears,' and all that sort of stuff."

"But you told them you were going to consult me," insisted Speed.

She nodded. "I certainly didn't pro-

pose to place myself in the power of two persons of whom I knew nothing. I insisted that I had the right to take a bodyguard and I mentioned your name. I felt that I should have some one of keen mental powers, as well as physical strength."

Speed grinned, ducked his head in acknowledgment of the compliment and remarked: "All right, I'm coming; but you may make a scandal as well as having an adventure."

She smiled brightly. "Don't worry. We'll be well chaperoned. My aunt, Mrs. Fairchild, accompanies me wherever I go as companion and chaperon, although she'll go straight up in the air when I tell her we're going after buried treasure."

"Told her yet?"

The girl shook her head. "I wouldn't tell her until after the arrangements were all made, and the arrangements weren't all made until you agreed to come. We leave to-morrow morning. The island's one of the Solomons. You'll enjoy the story, and the decoded message, and all."

Speed nodded and returned the parchment chart. "See those little holes in the parchment?" he asked, indicating certain little pin pricks which appeared in the paper at regular intervals.

The girl leaned forward. "Why, yes, I see them now. What are they?"

Speed shrugged his shoulders. "I merely wondered—thought perhaps you might know. If not, never mind. I'd like to see the people you're going with and take a look at that ancient document. Funny thing about this chart! It shows the island, but there's no name on the island and no latitude and longitude bearings. The parchment has been trimmed away on the upper end as though to cut away a part of it which contained some information."

The girl nodded. "Yes. That's true. Mr. Valencia explained that while he would trust me perfectly as soon as I had decided to finance the trip, he would have to withhold the information as to the exact location of the island until after we were well under way."

"Oh, well," remarked Speed, "that's only fair. Give me a ring when you want me to meet the others. Good morning."

His visitor grinned, again opened her vanity case and tossed a signed check to the table.

"That's a retainer. You're a man to my liking. You take the idea of searching for buried treasure as though it was all in the day's ordinary routine. I was afraid you'd scoff at the idea."

Speed shook his well-shaped head emphatically. "Not me. You're not looking for treasure. You're looking for adventure, and it'll probably be a good thing for you. And something seems to tell me you'll find it—lots of it."

When she had left Speed stroked his chin with his long, delicate fingers; fingers which seemed more those of an artist rather than the fingers which were capable of crushing a raw potato to pulp.

"Pin pricks in the map—three offers to leave the country in a day. There was over three thousand dollars in the pile of bank notes Gallardo showed me, and the woman on the telephone offers me five thousand for the London trip. This girl says nothing about rate of compensation, merely offers to employ me as sort of a personal bodyguard, and leaves a retainer of a thousand dollars. Heigh-ho! it's a strange world—and she'll have adventure, all right, adventure and to spare—I can see a lot of things clearly now."

CHAPTER III.

IN QUEST OF TREASURE OR ADVENTURE?

TWO more things that day were duly noted by Speed as being worthy of consideration. One was that the Mrs. Battleboro who had been so anxious

that he should go to London, managed to control her anxiety wonderfully, for Speed did not hear from her again.

The next thing was that Ramon Valencia did not show up at the conference of treasure hunters which was held that evening. His sister reported that he "had taken a faster boat and gone on ahead in order to make certain arrangements concerning transportation from the nearest port of call to the island shown on the chart."

It was a strange conference—those four who sat grouped around the fireplace in a sumptuously furnished drawing-room, surrounded by all the conveniences of modern civilization, and talking of the Spanish Main, of doubloons and pieces of eight.

Leta Danforth, her gray eyes shining with eager enthusiasm, her evening gown revealing the slim lines of her graceful figure, dainty features, white arms, slender fingers. Mrs. Rose Fairchild, her aunt, inclined to be old-fashioned, prim, precise, registering disapproval of the whole wild scheme, yet loyal to her niece. She was determined to accompany her.

Doris Valencia, a woman of indefinite age, her eyes dark and languorous, her complexion a clear olive, yet with an artificiality about her voice which made her words drip with a sound of cooing insincerity. Speed Dash, the man who could climb almost any building, aided by no other means than architectural irregularities, and the strength of his fingers, clad in close-fitting whipcords. His darting, black eyes were taking in each and every detail with the tireless certainty of a clicking camera.

Doris Valencia insisted that the expedition must be so arranged that none would know of it. Leta Danforth and her aunt must abruptly announce that they were leaving for a sanitarium where Miss Danforth would rest her nerves. No intimation of the real destination must be given.

Speed Dash was to leave his office "on business." Upon no other condition would Doris Valencia consent to undertake the trip. Vaguely she hinted of dangers, of mysterious shadows, of governmental control, of buried treasure. And, at length, Leta Danforth agreed to do as the woman wished.

Having secured that point, the woman advanced another.

"There will be one other who will come with me," she said, "a man in whom I have the greatest confidence. He will take the place of my brother for protection and constant watchfulness," went on Doris Valencia, her eyes the while fixed on Speed's face. "He knows something concerning the nature of the mission, but not enough to be dangerous. He is loyal, one who wishes me well.

"If, in the fire of his ardor, you should find cause for amusement, please remember that we of the Latin races feel more strongly than you of the North. In that very devotion, there is the seed of a protection which must, of necessity, include you all."

She took her eyes from Speed and looked long at each of the others.

"Bring him along," said Leta Danforth, and there was something of relief in her tone.

Speed kept his eyes upon the twisting fingers of the dark girl.

"She spoke that like a cross section of a dictionary," he softly muttered to himself, as was his habit when thinking deeply. "If she didn't have that all prepared, written down and memorized, I'm a liar."

However he said nothing aloud. His silence provoked a sharp glance from Leta Danforth. He waved his hand to her, indicating that he left all of such matters to her, and did not seek to limit her judgment in any way.

At the close of the conference Speed managed to get a word with Miss Danforth alone.

"Are you going on this trip in search of treasure or in search of adventure?" he asked.

She regarded him quizzically. "Both."

Speed nodded. "But suppose you can't have both. Suppose the treasure could not be recovered? Would you still go for the adventure?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, "and if you think there isn't any treasure, please don't tell me. Let me go on and dream of it. It would rob the adventure of its charm otherwise."

Speed grinned. "All right; but I'll tell you this much. If you want to be absolutely safe, don't go. Remain at home."

Leta Danforth frowned, and her eyes snapped. "Bah! Who wants to be absolutely safe? I'm going. *We're* going."

"The trip will do you good," agreed Speed and wished her good night.

They were to sail two days later, and, an hour before the departure of the boat, Speed received a letter by special messenger:

Cancel sailing plans. Have decided to remain. LETA DANFORTH.

Speed looked at his watch. He had barely time to make the boat. He went to his safe and took out the uncashed check which Leta Danforth had given him as a retainer, and studied the signature, compared it with the signature on the note. Then he indorsed the check and instructed his secretary to deposit it to his account. The note was a forgery, a clever, skillful forgery, but a forgery nevertheless.

Nor did any one aboard the boat mention the note to him. The party of five sailed according to schedule, and if any of the party had expected Speed to be left behind they concealed it admirably.

There was that about the man whom Doris Valencia had brought to take the place of her brother which engendered distrust, hostility, suspicion. Ferdinand Gonzales was the name under which he had smirkingly acknowledged the introductions to the ladies, and bowed effusively over the hand of Speed Dash.

He was a man of moods, of dignity and an inordinate pride in his personal appearance. A long mustache stretched to either side of his thick mouth. His reddish-brown, smoldering eyes glittered under bushy black brows. He carried himself with what was doubtless intended for a military bearing, but which had too much of pomp to it to have ever seen much actual use in a camp.

Frankly attentive to Doris Valencia, insanely jealous of her every glance, he followed her about, twisting his mustache and glaring about him. To Speed Dash he seemed to have taken a particular dislike, which was masked behind oily words of suave flattery and manifested itself only by the expression of smoldering hatred in the eyes.

It seemed that the man could mask perfectly the emotions which would otherwise have shown in his words and tone, but could not control the expression of his eyes. Perhaps he failed to realize how completely they reflected his inner feelings. His jealousy was evident to Speed.

It seemed that Doris Valencia took a fiendish delight in lavishing her smiles upon Speed, particularly when in the presence of Señor Ferdinand Gonzales. However, Speed pursued the even tenor of his ways, occasionally contributing a pertinent remark to the general conversation. For the most part though, he would sleepily relax, watching the glint of the sun upon the tossing waters.

Leta Danforth manifested a growing interest in the detective, was frequently ensconced in a steamer chair by his side. She asked him for the details of some of the cases which had found their way, in skeleton form, into the public press. These details Speed gave her only when there seemed no escape, short of actual

rudeness, discounting his own individual part in the solution of the mysteries which thrilled the gray-eyed girl.

Mrs. Fairchild watched the progress of the acquaintance in tight-lipped austerity, but gradually, the hostility faded from her eyes. There was that about Speed which called forth spontaneous friendship from nearly every one.

It was plain that there was nothing of the fortune hunter about him. He accepted the association of the joint venture casually, without seeking to presume upon it. He did not try to make a good impression, merely acting his natural self. Also, he enjoyed the opportunity to relax, to daydream through the long, balmy days.

As the boat slipped southward the days became warmer, more balmy. The whistling of the wind at night gave place to the whirring of electric fans as they kept the air in circulation. The long, ground swells of the northern Pacific gave place to the sloppy chops which barely rippled the surface of the blue ocean. Flying fish skimmed before the boat. Sharks appeared here and there, their long fins cutting through the water, swiftly, effortlessly, ominously.

Then there came a subtle change, a change which seemed at first to be merely a variation of psychic pressure, an inner mental unrest. The word passed about the ship that the barometer was swiftly falling, that the captain was preparing the boat for a severe storm. Members of the crew unostentatiously slipped about the life boats, inspecting the lashings of the canvas covers, looking over the tackle.

Everything loose on the deck was lashed or taken below hatches.

The heat became breathless, intense; a sullen silence hovered over the brassy surface of the glittering ocean. Far to the southwest, appeared a stretch of dark water, a grim bar of blue which began to spread, to advance with bewildering rapidity. Above it there raced a strip of black sky, and yet there was no wind. The boat continued to throb its even way over a calm ocean.

Orders were issued to the passengers to retire to their cabins. Deck chairs were hurriedly removed, and beneath the dark of the cloud could be seen the writhing, twisting, tossing shapes of grotesque waves—waves which danced, piled rapidly up, and then descended in a tumbling mass of white water.

The passengers went to their hot cabins, white of face, here and there grumbling among themselves or expressing fear at the coming storm. Occasionally a laugh rang out, but it lacked spontaneity.

Minutes passed, and then, of a sudden there came a wild shriek of wind in the rigging. The ship heeled far to leeward —seemed almost on the point of rolling completely over, then slowly righted, her nose plowing into the plunging seas.

A well of green water crashed against the bows, cascaded over onto the deck, hissed past the lower cabins and slopped through the scuppers. The air suddenly became black as though daytime had abruptly turned to midnight, and the storm lashed the waves to fury against the sides of the passenger steamer.

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST HINTS OF DANGER.

THERE followed an anxious two hours. The gloom of the storm merged into the darkness of a wind-whipped night. Then, down the deserted passageway between cabins there came a dark figure, skulking with furtive menace. In his eyes there glowed the smoldering light of burning rage. In his hand there glittered a knife.

While the boat lurched and plunged into the storm this man went about some mysterious errand of his own—an errand which seemed to fittingly adapt itself to the wild whistling of the wind, the tossing of seething waters.

The skulking figure darted around a corner in the passageway and disappeared. The great frame of the ship creaked slowly as the decks righted to level, then swung sharply to port, plunged downward, then again rolled back to starboard. And then the lights went out. Some trouble had developed in the lighting system, and the huge ship was plunged in darkness that seemed to be of physical weight—hot, oppressive, ominous.

The headway had been reduced, and the ship pressed into the storm barely holding steerage way, keeping her head into the wind and boiling waves. Officers shouted commands, seeking to establish the cause of the sudden failure of the lights. They had no time to patrol the passageways to learn the errand of the mysterious figure which had slipped so quickly and furtively into the darkness.

Minutes passed. The sound of crashing waters mingled with the howling of the wind in the rigging, and was suddenly pierced by the shrill scream of a woman, a long-drawn, well-rounded scream of terror—an appeal for help. Above the sound of the storm it rang through the upper section of staterooms, bringing passengers hurrying to cabin doors, inspiring a chorus of answering shouts.

Then, as suddenly as they had been extinguished, the lights came on. There were disclosed white, anxious faces in the doors of staterooms, and the form of a woman, clad in filmy negligée, a squat, ugly automatic pistol in her hand, racing down the passageway, her kimono fluttering in the air behind her.

An officer appeared. He called to the woman, headed her off. Grasping the pistol in his hand, he gazed down into the flaming eyes of Doris Valencia.

"The chart!" she shouted. "The chart has been taken—almost he killed me. Only that I flung myself upon him when I heard him approach the berth—and then the cruel, searching fingers—the chart——"

The officer escorted her down the swaying, lurching passageway, ordering the other passengers back to their rooms. The storm was abating somewhat, but the boat was still under half speed. The trouble with the lighting system had been traced. That it had been caused by the deliberate tampering of some person who knew the workings of the boat's electrical system was plainly shown. This led the officers to investigate the reported theft of the chart with grave faces.

After those first few words, however, Doris Valencia grew very evasive, extremely vague as to particulars. The storm abated almost as suddenly as it had arisen, and Doris Valencia sent messages to Speed Dash, to Leta Danforth, and to Ferdinand Gonzales.

To them alone she told the full details of the invasion of her stateroom at the height of the storm, the dark figure which went to her bed, the struggle, the thrusting knife, the snatching of the chart.

Leta Danforth said nothing. Her eyes sought those of Speed in mute questioning. She seemed to feel that he was trained in the investigation of crime and was best equipped to cope with such a situation. If there was any suggestion of reproach, any vague intimation that Speed had been negligent, she kept it to herself. Not by word or look did she intimate any such idea.

Not so, however, with Ferdinand Gonzales. He not only intimated that Speed had failed in his duty, but went further and insinuated that Speed could tell something of the affair were he so inclined. Fiercely he twisted his mustache, glowered balefully at Speed, and delivered himself of several well-chosen comments.

"It was some one who knew the nature of the mission," he spat, his eyes dark with emotion. "Some one who

knew that the woman had the chart. Some one, even, who knew where it was kept. In short it was some one who had information which only the members of this little gathering should have had."

He ceased talking abruptly, and there was something in the very gesture by which he twirled the ends of his mustache between fingers and thumb that conveyed insult.

Speed apparently did not notice the thinly veiled accusation. "Yeah," he said softly, almost absently, "and of course he knew Miss Valencia's room so he could find his way about it in the dark, knew just where to grab that chart, knew where everything was placed, even to her personal effects."

Ferdinand Gonzales jumped to his feet.

"That is an insult, an insult to the señorita. You shall pay——"

His hand flashed to his waist, and he lurched at Speed Dash with a demoniacal fury twisting the swarthy features of his dark face.

Speed made not so much as the faintest suggestion of a motion. Sprawled out on the couch in the stateroom, he held his knee between his interlocked hands, and continued his meditating, apparently oblivious to the menace of the rushing adversary.

"And if he knew so much about the chart why did he need to steal it?" went on Speed, still speaking in that abstractive monotone.

It was Doris Valencia who checked the rushing man, who stopped him by a single sharp word, held him by a hand laid lightly upon his wrist. At her touch the fury of the man seemed to evaporate into thin air. Abruptly he became calm, listened to her instructions and left the room. Speed followed him after a short interval, apparently giving no great thought to the theft of the chart.

The waters had become as calm as before the tropical squall, an old moon rode above the tranquil waters, while the air, purified by the rain and wind, was soft, balmy, containing a hint of spices. Here, on the deck, as Speed paced rhythmically back and forth, Leta Danforth came to him, confronted him, acknowledged his bow with a mere inclination of the head. Her lips were unsmiling, her eyes steady.

"Mr. Dash," she said, "I've left things in your hands. You understand that I want adventure, but I have no wish to court danger. It is very evident that things are not running smoothly, that there is some element of danger in this trip, some subtle undercurrent of hostility. I have one question to ask. Do you, or do you not, know what you're doing?"

Speed looked at the white blur of her face, at the deep, shadowy eyes, took in every detail of the thin figure outlined against the moonlit glow of the tropical sea.

"Miss Danforth," he said at length, "I know what I am doing. At the present time you are in no actual danger, regardless of how things may appear. Before you get back you probably will be in grave danger.

"If you want to turn back now you have that option. If you wish to be absolutely safe you should turn back. If you want to court adventure, excitement, encounter an element of danger, you can go ahead. In the meantime, I'm protecting your interests."

There was a ring of sincerity in his tone, a something which impressed her, and her slim hand darted out in the moonlight.

"You're right, Mr. Dash. I'm going to call you Speed from now on—and I have confidence in you. Tell me, was that chart actually stolen? Was Miss Valencia in actual danger?"

Speed shook his head. "Everything in good time, young lady. I'm not ready to make any deductions before I've got

more data. There's one development that hasn't showed up yet, and I'm waiting for that. When that occurs you'll see some action—and then there may be some danger."

And the girl was forced to be content with that reply for Speed would vouchsafe no further information.

At length the voyage came to an end. The little party disembarked at an island port where tall cocoanut trees stabbed their fronds into the deep blue of a tropical sky. Huge waves curled lazily shoreward, pounding on coral reefs, limpid lagoons basked beneath the burning rays of the sun. Showers appeared suddenly from nowhere and the southern cross swung high in the night heavens.

Everywhere was an atmosphere of calm tranquillity. The noise and rush of the colder climes had been left behind. The whole world basked in sunshine, drowsily slipped through endless time. Eternity ceased to be an incomprehensible theory and became an established fact.

There had been a change in the attitude of the party. Subtly it had divided into two distinct parts, the three against the two. Doris Valencia and Ferdinand Gonzales seemed welded together by some psychic bond—a bond which excluded Leta, Mrs. Fairchild, and Speed—left the three to themselves. And of all this Speed seemed totally oblivious, almost stupid in his abstractions.

Doris Valencia made arrangements for the boat which was to take them on the last lap of their journey. It was the *Cloud*, a yacht some fifty feet in length, bearing the marks of much service. The teakwood finish was grimy with careless use—the paint unevenly applied to the exterior.

The sails were patched and streaked—the cordage dark and uncared for. Yet it had been at one time a gentleman's yacht, a fast sailing toy that was more than a toy. How it happened to be so opportunely available, waiting at this remote port was a mystery, a mystery for which no explanation was forthcoming.

After a three-day unexplained delay the personal effects of the party were placed aboard the yacht. water and provisions stored, and two dark-skinned islanders employed as crew. Ferdinand Gonzales assumed charge of the operations, seemed to be efficient to a rare degree in fitting the yacht for the ocean, more, he seemed to be perfectly at home aboard the vessel. He announced that they would sail with the morning tide.

CHAPTER V.

UNBURIED TREASURE.

THAT night Speed sought out Leta Danforth as she sat on the hotel porch, listening to the lapping waters, watching the steady sweep of the tropical stars.

"Before we return there will be danger," he said simply.

She turned in silence, surveyed his dark outline for a few minutes, then laid a languid hand on his arm

"Do you wish to turn back?"

She could see the shrug of his shoulders. "That is the question I came to ask of you."

"No," she said, after an interval. "I have no wish to turn back. Rather, I welcome the danger, whatever it may be. I have a feeling that you will be more than capable of coping with it. Tell me, when will this danger begin?"

Speed laughed lightly. "Whenever the persons who are plotting against you find out what steps I have taken to foil their plots," he replied, and then abruptly changed the subject.

After a long chat Speed left her and went to the water front. Commandeering a skiff, he paddled out to the yacht which rode at anchor. There was no one aboard, and Speed had but to manipulate a lock in the main cabin to find himself at liberty to explore the boat.

His search was made quickly and to the point.

Locating the yacht's log, he sat at the cabin table and studied it intently for half an hour, making copies of several positions of latitude and longitude. Then he closed the book, replaced it where he had found it, and stepped out into the night, paddled back to the dock, and sought his bed. There was upon his lips the smile of one whose deductions have been proven.

The next morning they sailed, and, as they sailed, Ferdinand Gonzales announced that the loss of the chart would not deter him in the least. The directions given in the pirate's document were amply sufficient to enable him to sail upon the proper course, he said. Then he explained that he felt that he could locate the island without difficulty, that the loss of the chart had only been of significance in that it proved enemies were on their trail. Such enemies might seek to race with them to the island where the treasure was located.

Speed listened and said nothing.

Three days of smooth water, of perfect weather, and they came to an island. There had been other islands which had appeared on one side or the other, had slipped away to the stern unnoticed by the commander of the little boat. This appeared dead ahead, the bowsprit cutting fairly into the blue haze which marked the high, volcanic ridge of the island.

The purple haze grew higher, the headlands became more distinct, and the little yacht slipped into a harbor, and slid through quiet waters. The sails rattled down—the anchor chain roared through the hawse pipes, and the yacht came to anchor as daintily as a sea gull sitting upon the surface of the water.

Ferdinand Gonzales came aft, twisting his mustache, his dark eyes glittering with triumph. "The island of the treasure!" he exclaimed, "and I have found it without the aid of the chart!"

Speed nodded casually. "Yeah," he said, unimpressed.

Gonzales glared.

"Did you notice the pin pricks there were in that chart an' a couple of 'em with a little lead pencil cross on 'em?" went on Speed.

Leta Danforth watched him curiously. It was the second time he had mentioned those mysterious pin pricks in the chart. The effect of the question was magical. Ferdinand Gonzales recoiled as though he had been struck a blow with a club. His eyes darted about like those of an animal, and his face paled slightly.

Doris Valencia was quick to assume the conversational lead, cooing out flattering remarks concerning the navigating abilities of Gonzales, smoothing over the situation. Gonzales remained aloof, distant, his eyes incredulously seeking Speed's face from time to time. It was as though he wondered what the detective had discovered.

"To-morrow we will go in search of the pirate treasure," announced Doris, her dark eyes sweeping the faces of the little group assembled under the canvas awning. "It is too late this afternoon."

Speed stretched and yawned, and something about his matter-of-fact attitude impressed the others, held down their excitement. Leta Danforth found herself curiously suppressed, not buoyed up by excitement as she had expected.

That night she sought Speed as he sat upon the deck, watching the phosphorescent streaks left by darting fish, by patrolling sharks, and took him to task.

"Why don't you enthuse over the treasure?" she asked.

Speed laughed lightly. "Because it isn't there?"

"Yes?"

"Yes. You see that's the mystery about those pin pricks in the chart. This boat has been to the island once before. That's why the loss of the chart didn't

keep Gonzales from finding it. The pin pricks were made by dividers as they checked off the distance. The pricks which were crossed with a light pencil mark were those which showed the noon positions of the ship. That's the way navigators mark where they are on a chart."

The girl looked at him curiously. "Then what was the object in getting me to finance a trip to this island? I've only paid traveling expenses, you know."

Speed nodded. "Unless I'm mistaken that will come out to-morrow. You see I wanted you to have all the adventure you could, but wanted to stop short of actual danger. To-morrow danger would start, and I have made arrangements to safeguard your interests."

He would have said more, but, at that moment, from the dark outline of the island there sounded a peculiar, muffled, throbbing sound. This sound gradually became louder and louder, appealing to the primitive, seeming to quicken the pulsations of the blood—the steady booming of a war drum.

The sound grew constantly in intensity until each beat of the drum could be distinctly heard, reverberating over the stretch of quiet water. It was impossible to locate the direction of the sound other than generally. It hardly seemed to be a sound, but was more a throbbing of the air which caused a corresponding throbbing of the psychic centers of the body, a booming which entered the blood itself.

"Oh, I don't like that!" exclaimed the girl.

Speed's lips tightened. "A development I hadn't counted upon," he admitted. "I suppose on the prior trip they had some trouble with the natives. However, I don't think there is any cause for worry."

Mrs. Fairchild came swiftly toward them, her thin form seeming to fairly fly over the deck.

"Do you hear that noise?" she asked. "It's terrible, and you should see Mr. Gonzales! He's panic-stricken. He's trying to put on a brave face, but I'm satisfied he's as frightened as I am."

Speed shrugged his shoulders. "I think we're safe until to-morrow, and by to-morrow I look for developments."

And then, as it had started, gradually, almost imperceptibly the drumming died down, became more and more indistinct, until finally the ears could no longer detect the sound, although it seemed that the nerves could still feel it. Perhaps they merely continued the rhythm which had been engendered. Perhaps they were more sensitive than the ears and could feel the muffled pulsations which had died down until they ceased to be perceptible as distinct sounds.

"Anyhow, we'll keep a watch to-night, and, in the meantime, we'd better roll in," suggested Speed, and for once, his words seemed to lack conviction. It was as though some unexpected development had robbed him of control of the situation.

However, the night slipped by without any alarm, although none of the persons on the boat caught much sleep. Constantly alert, Speed kept watch in the foresheets, concealed in the dark shadows, watching, listening, waiting.

Morning—and with the morning there came a sail on the horizon. Speed's swift eyes noted the sail, saw that it was constantly growing larger, and he smiled his satisfaction. Still smiling, he went below and greeted the others.

He found Ferdinand Gonzales red-eyed and sullen; evidently he had passed a sleepless night, and was worrying more than he cared to admit. Even the poise of Doris Valencia seemed shaken. Her voice had lost its cooing veneer of culture, and rasped hard and grating.

"Perhaps we'd best drop the mask," suggested Doris Valencia, her dark eyes suddenly grown as hard as two flints. "We want a hundred thousand dollars,

and we want it without any strings on it."

Leta Danforth recoiled from the harsh tone of the voice, as well as from the words themselves.

"What!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah," said Speed, yawning.

CHAPTER VI.

GUARDED BY SHARKS.

INTO action Ferdinand Gonzales flashed, his hands racing below the table, emerged with two automaties which covered the detective. Mrs. Fairchild screamed, and Leta Danforth gazed about her in startled incredulity.

"Yes," snapped Doris Valencia, and the words poured forth in sudden torrent, as though the force of her anger had broken through the dam of her self-restraint. "You little butterfly! You've had every advantage, inherited money, never had to want for anything!

"You've had looks, social position, wealth, everything. I've had nothing but trouble. Ever since I can remember I've had to live by my wits. You've been protected, always shielded from danger. Bah! When you start on a treasure hunt you even have your detective come with you to see that no possible harm can befall you. All right! Here's where you have a chance to experience a little something of what I've been through.

"Your detective thinks he's mighty smart talking about the pin pricks in the chart. Well, he's right. We have been here before, and the map's a fake. There's no pirate treasure here. We stole the chart from some men who were outfitting an expedition, and we found the island. There wasn't any treasure here, but it was an uncharted island that no one knew existed. It suited our purpose. You've paid the expenses of coming here, and you'll pay the expenses of going back. In the meantime if you so much as try to thwart our plans you'll get shot for your pains!"

Speed laughed.

"S'pose we quit this little farce," he said, and there was something in his tone that compelled attention. "I've been onto you almost from the first. That pin pricked chart gave me the first warning, and then you tried so hard to keep me from accompanying Miss Danforth, that gave me a second warning.

"This Mr. Gallardo who wanted to give me a huge sum of money to go to South America—this mysterious Mrs. Battleboro, who wanted me to go to London! Bah! you've all been too simple! You wanted me out of the way because you didn't want Miss Danforth to consult me. Then when she did get in touch with me, you suddenly changed your plans, decided to sidetrack me at the last minute.

"But you made a mistake with that forged note trying to keep me back. It showed that you could forge Miss Danforth's signature perfectly, that that was your real game. First you wanted her to disappear with you on your strange treasure hunt, letting her friends think she had gone to a sanitarium for treatment.

"During that time you had arranged to have forged checks presented to her bank, to gather all the loot you could in that manner; and, lastly, you planned to get her out here on this island and force her to give a ransom before you would allow her to return.

"Well, we've had our little adventure, and you'll have to pay the price. I left word with the police when we left, and the first person presenting a forged check was arrested. The bank was warned to be on its guard against forgeries on Miss Danforth's account. As for the present situation, I left directions with the resident agent to send a government boat out here and pick you up, and if you'll just take a look outside you'll see the boat standing into the harbor."

Speed's words might have been a bombshell as far as their effect was concerned. Doris Valencia glanced at Ferdinand Gonzales, the color draining from her face.

"Look, quickly!" she exclaimed.

Gonzales tossed her one of the weapons, and stepped up the companionway. A moment later and he was back, his face confirming their defeat.

"The boat will be here in fifteen minutes," he said, then uttered an oath.

Leta Danforth shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Well done, Speed," she said, "but I almost would wish you hadn't been so efficient. As it is, I've had only a taste of adventure, and I'll have to go back to the sheltered existence of being a social butterfly."

"And it's high time you did!" snapped her aunt. "The idea of coming on a wild goose chase like this. If it hadn't been for Mr. Dash you might have been in all sorts of trouble by this time. You'll come home with me, young lady, and this'll be the last time you start out with total strangers upon any such expedition!"

Speed laughed, and then, suddenly the laugh froze upon his face. He had been watching the face of Doris Valencia, and something in her expression had given him warning.

Her shrill laugh rang harshly upon the warm air.

"Fool!" she exclaimed. "You spoke too quickly. I know that boat. You shall see whether or not it is the police who come!"

A few moments and her words had been amply justified. The boat entered the harbor, lowered the sails, slipped quietly alongside. A thin, swarthy face appeared at the rail—the face of the man who had introduced himself to Speed as José Gallardo. The man who had posed to Leta Danforth as the brother of Doris Valencia. Behind him appeared several dusky forms rushing about, getting the anchor down, standing by with boat hooks and lines, a husky crew of grinning cutthroats.

The man waved a greeting, gave a few sharp orders which brought the boats together, and jumped over the rail. He wasted no word of greeting upon the others, but pointed a long, bony finger at Speed.

"That man is a devil!" he shouted. "He arranged for my arrest as soon as I presented a check at the bank. By stupidity on the part of the police I made my escape, but it was merely a lucky fluke. Then I followed you here and at the other stop I crossed his trail again. He had left a message to be delivered to the resident agent, complaining of you, telling the whole scheme, even giving sailing directions for reaching this island.

"But I intercepted that message, and came rushing to you. Nor is that all. Sam Baxter, from whom we originally secured the pirate document and the treasure chart, has learned where we were heading. By means of a trained thief who entered your stateroom he has retaken possession of the chart and located the island. When I left he was planning to sail on the next tide. He and his men will be here at almost any time!"

Speed's jaw clenched, his shoulders hunched forward slightly and he poised on the balls of his feet, but his plans were anticipated. José Gallardo had seen enough of the diabolical efficiency of Speed's mind to take no chances with him. He pointed a swift finger.

"Keep him covered. Shoot him if he moves. He is a devil, I tell you!"

Instantly two guns were trained upon Speed, two guns that needed but the slightest excuse to thunder forth their leaden contents.

Speed turned to Leta with a wry grin.

"And now," he said, "it commences to look as though you would have some adventures after all."

José Gallardo, arch villain that he was, brains of the combination, instantly assumed full charge of the situation. The woman had dominated the rascally Ferdinand Gonzales, but José Gallardo dominated them both, his alert, ratlike eyes seeming to miss no detail, his cruel mouth tightened into a thin line.

"Sam Baxter is a killer, and he will come prepared to fight," he announced when he had gathered his conspirators about him, "but he will hardly expect to encounter two boats. Rather he's only counting on one, and that one containing three women.

"We'll get ready for defense, but first we've got to do something with these prisoners until we can get rid of Baxter. We may have to make a running fight of it. We may have to abandon one boat, or, perhaps lose one. We dare not let Sam Baxter get his hands upon *our* treasure. The chart was his treasure and it was a false alarm, but the girl is our treasure, and she will insure us good pickings before we allow her to escape.

"Get the skiff over the side and row them to the shore. They can never make their escape from that little bay. The sharks will patrol the water and the circling headlands are unscalable. Once in there and they will be placed in storage from which we can take them when we are ready."

Doris Valencia shuddered slightly.

"But the natives!" she said. "Last night their war drums were booming, the gathering call. You'll remember we had a little trouble with them when we left last time."

Gallardo clamped his cruel mouth. "To thunder with the natives! We're all taking chances. They'll have a chance to keep under cover, and the natives won't bother 'em unless they get past us. It's better to let the natives get them than to have Sam Baxter steal our prize. Out with 'em, and take no chances on that fellow. He's a devil, I tell you. From the first he had our plans sized up, and why he let us get as far as we did is more than I know."

There was no further discussion. Gallardo had spoken, and his word was law. Covered by two guns, the party was rowed to the shore and forced to disembark. Speed watched proceedings grimly, kept his eye upon the weapons, but had no chance to risk a rush. One asset he had which the others knew nothing about and that was the terrific strength of his fingers and muscular shoulders.

However, it was worse than useless to attempt resistance in the face of the two guns which kept him covered. If his theory was correct, the two women would need his protection far too urgently to allow him to chance a rush which would probably terminate in his death.

The beach upon which they were landed stretched white and glistening under the tropical sun. Beyond, there appeared a dense mass of greenery, tangled undergrowth, high coconut trees, long streamers of tough vine. It was virtually impenetrable without the aid of a knife and hatchet to cut a trail, and once penetrated it offered no means of escape. Within a quarter of a mile of the beach the huge lava cap which constituted the main part of the island, arose in an abrupt wall which had been washed by the ocean in some prehistoric time until it overhung the little area below.

Perhaps half a mile long, by a quarter of a mile deep, the little patch of ground was cut off from the interior by the sheer, overhanging wall. On the fourth side was the lagoon, and in the lagoon there appeared the projecting fins of patrolling sharks as they cruised lazily through the waters in search of food. A swimmer or wader would last but a few seconds in such shark-infested waters.

CHAPTER VII.

FEAR OF THIRST.

THE men in the skiff placed the party ashore, then turned and rowed rapidly back to the *Cloud*. On shore the three looked at each other, recognizing their helplessness. Unarmed, they were at the mercy of the enemy, marooned upon the island, guarded by sharks.

"Well," remarked Speed, with forced cheerfulness, "we wanted adventure, and here we are."

Leta Danforth laughed cheerily.

"We sure are," she agreed. "And it's all my fault. I should never have placed myself in the power of these people."

Speed shook his head. "Your fault nothing! I don't know just who is to blame, but I am if any one. I knew the whole scheme from the first, saw that they were trying to keep me from accompanying you. I realized that they were able to make a very fair forgery of your name, and knew that the chart had been used at least once by some mariner who checked his positions frequently. This made me suspect that it was the man who had called on me as José Gallardo. It's just been a series of unfortunate breaks. First Gallardo escapes from the police after I had taken means to insure his arrest. Then he intercepts the message I had thought would be safely delivered to the authorities, and—well, here we are."

Speed was inclined to be philosophical now that the worst had happened, and his philosophy was founded upon two things. First, he felt that he had done everything in his power, and, second, he was accustomed to facing danger, knew something of his own powers, and realized that he would yet render an account of himself.

It was the dry voice of Mrs. Fairchild which recalled them to their present position.

"That canoe looks just like the pictures I used to see in my geography in school," she remarked crisply.

The others glanced quickly at her thin-lipped face, then followed the direction of her gaze. A canoe propelled by a dozen savages had shot around one of the headlands and was headed toward the place where the two yachts were lying at anchor. Even as they looked, another canoe came into view and then a third. The dark-skinned men were paddling with swift, steady, sure strokes, and the canoes fairly hissed through the still waters of the lagoon.

In the bow of the leading canoe appeared a man in a battered plug hat and torn Prince Albert coat. In spite of the incongruity of his appearance there was yet a quiet, austere dignity about him—the dignity which enshrouds a brave man going into battle against overwhelming odds.

The savages greatly outnumbered those in the boats, but they were armed merely with spears, bows, arrows, and war clubs. Those on the yachts were armed with rifles, and, unless they could get close enough before they were detected, the savages stood but little chance.

Speed summed up the situation in a crisp sentence. "Whichever one wins will make it bad for us," he remarked with a dry smile, and that was as hopeful an interpretation as any one could put upon the affair.

"If the boats don't see 'em within the next few feet they'll lose out," observed Speed, watching the situation intently.

Even as the words left his mouth there sounded the dry crack of a rifle. Upon the hot, still air it sounded barely louder than a pop gun, seemed to carry no deadly menace whatever, yet one of the paddlers threw out his hands and plunged into the water. There came a swift swirl of fins, a boiling whirlpool, and then all was quiet. The other paddlers swept forward without pause.

There came a series of explosions, answered from the canoes by a number of yells, and the savages bore down, only to falter under the withering fire which commenced to sweep over the canoes.

The man in the plug hat turned, waved his arms, shouted, and the canoes swung so abruptly that the maneuver came as a surprise to those on the yachts. Bullets which had been aimed to rake the paddlers fell into the water in a hail of spurting geysers, and the war canoes were in retreat, paddling more frantically now, disorganized yet making wonderful time.

Nor did those on the yachts cease their firing as the savages retreated. Men ran along the decks. There came the rattle of anchor chain. Sails were hoisted, and the boats began to gather headway, heeling over to the fresh breeze which had sprung up. They went rippling their way across the lagoon with increasing speed, a wave curling up before the graceful prows.

"Seems a shame, but I guess there's to be no mercy on either side," said Leta Danforth, as she watched the pursuit.

Speed said nothing. He was thinking of how much chance they would stand should they fall into the hands of the savages. Regardless of what the cause of the original trouble might have been, after this battle the natives would show but little mercy to any whites who fell into their hands. A swift death would be the greatest blessing such prisoners could ask for.

His eyes swept out to the ocean which now commenced to show scudding whitecaps as the breeze freshened. Then he saw something which made him grip the arm of the girl. Another boat swung around the far headland and was cutting across the waters of the lagoon, all sail set, making every foot of speed the wind permitted. In the bows sat several men with rifles, and they sat grimly, purposefully.

"The police?" she asked.

Speed's trained eye had taken in every detail of the boat.

He shook his head. "Sam Baxter, probably; and they say *he's* a devil. No matter how the thing comes out we'll be out of luck as far as those fellows are concerned—but——"

"But what, Speed?" the girl's eyes were bright as they rested upon the determined profile of his fine face.

"But if they keep mixing things up we'll stand a chance to do some fighting of our own," he answered as he led them into the shadows of the undergrowth. "Whatever happens let's not allow the Baxter crowd to see us."

"Young man!" snapped Mrs. Fairchild, as though Speed were in some way responsible for the government of this uncharted island. "Do you suppose there's a chance of those sail boats getting into such a fight among themselves that they'll sail away and leave us marooned here on this island?"

As she asked the question the last yacht swept from view back of the headland, and there came the staccato sounds of a burst of firing.

Speed nodded his head. "Surest thing you know, aunty," he said with sudden flippancy.

The woman snorted and marched stiffly erect into the jungle growth, but was soon forced to bow her shoulders, and to finally crawl into the shade of the dense thicket.

Speed spent the day in making a reconnaissance, seeking to ascertain something of the place in which they found themselves, and trying to find out what had happened to the yachts. After the sounds of firing had died away they had seen nothing of any of the boats.

The yachts as well as the canoes had vanished, and Speed began to question whether or not they would return. It was entirely probable that the Baxter crowd had put Gallardo and his crew to flight, and that Baxter would not put into shore, knowing the hostility of the

tribesmen, and not suspecting that three humans had been marooned by Gallardo.

To Speed's alarm he found that there was no fresh water in the little amphitheater which formed their prison. Because of the frequency of tropical rainstorms he had expected to find a trickling spring or some small stream. There was nothing.

The shortage of drinking water threatened to be their first real cause of suffering. They could probably secure some coconuts and drain the fluid from them, but, in that heat, drinking water was a necessity.

The lava wall which hemmed them in was nearly two hundred feet high. Apparently there had been a big cave washed in the lava wall. This cave must have finally collapsed, carrying the top soil down to the beach, but leaving a sheer overhang to the remaining walls. This overhang varied in different portions of the wall from being only a few feet of gradually curving arc to so great a curve that it seemed there was danger of more of the lava wall tumbling below.

The sun slipped down the western heavens, hung poised for a moment over the water and then dove beneath, plunging the world into almost immediate darkness. Such is the way of the tropics and it suited Speed exactly. A moon had appeared and was half full. He needed all of that moonlight he could get, and the quicker darkness descended the better.

He found some fruit that had proven to be very palatable. It had but little flavor, but was juicy and nourishing. The three prisoners made their evening meal of this fruit and watched the glint of the moonlight shimmering on the waters.

"Well, we better get what sleep we can," opined Speed, stretching and yawning. "Personally, I'm mighty sleepy, and we can't tell when we'll be routed up and taken aboard that boat. It's warm enough so we don't need a fire, and you folks can sleep over there. I'll ramble on down here a few yards and roll in."

He spoke with elaborate carelessness, wished them a casual good night and strode off into the shadows.

Mrs. Fairchild snorted. "Something of a false alarm, I should say!" she snapped through thin lips.

The girl made no comment, but watched Speed's shoulders as he swung away.

"Anyway, aunty, he's right in what he said, and we'd better see if we can get some sleep."

Speed paused long enough to make sure that neither one of the women was following, and then rippled into action. He slipped through the jungle growth on a little trail he had previously noted. He came to the lava wall at a point where there was considerable overhang, but where the irregularities in the surface appeared to be more firmly anchored. He knew that lava had a habit of disintegrating under the elements. Not the least of the dangers which confronted him in what he was about to do was the certainty of many of the rocks being loose.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN A SLIP MEANT DEATH

HE stripped down to the waist and slipped off shoes and socks. What was coming would be hard on his hands and feet, but it was a case of do or die. He realized that if the *Cloud* ever returned and José Gallardo sent for his prisoners the outlaw would see to it that Speed had no chance to protect the two women.

Also he had heard something of Sam Baxter—and as for the savages—— The only course which was open was for Speed either successfully to assume the aggressive or to give his life in the attempt. They could not live where they were, nor could they escape. To be left on the island would be as hor-

rible a fate as to be recaptured by one of the yachts.

He tried the irregular surface of the lava with his hand, then took a deep breath and set to work. His fingers had not lost their cunning. Had the wall been perpendicular he could have negotiated it without any great difficulty, other than the chance of portions of the lava wall slipping away beneath his weight.

And then, suddenly, from behind there came a swish of motion, something darted over the loose rock at the foot of the wall, and two arms shot around his neck.

"Oh, I knew you were going to try it. Please don't. I looked it all over this afternoon, and it's just plain suicide! You can't make it, and it won't do any good to sacrifice your life. Even if you could get up there what good would it do?

"The island is filled with savages, the waters are full of sharks, and there are three boats lying offshore unless they've sailed away. Any one of those boats means probably death to us. Let's wait and see what turns up. Please, Speed, please! I got you into this, you know, with my insane desire to have some adventure, to break away from the routine of life."

Speed gently disengaged the girl's hands, feeling the warmth of her cheek upon his shoulder, the gentle touch of her hair as it brushed his neck.

"I'm not used to waiting for things to turn up," he said. "I'm going out and turn 'em up—and I've got a little score to settle with a couple of 'em out there."

Nor did he wait to argue. With the words he had bunched the muscles in his shoulders, given a heave, and was scampering up the rock wall as lightly as a cat. At that point there was no overhang and the rock was firm and solid. To one of Speed's strength it offered no more obstacle to progress than a ladder. But quick as he had been, the girl had anticipated his action and Speed had felt the impress of a swift kiss on his cheek—the Godspeed of the waiting girl.

Slowly the cliff swung out over the perpendicular. It became necessary to cling with both hands and toes. The white strip of beach stood out a silver threat against the waters of the lagoon. The jungle showed below, dark, mysterious.

Coconut trees reared up out of the shadow into the gleaming moonlight, rustled their fronds in the faint breeze. The girl below was a mere blur of white, showing against the dark of the tumbled lava rocks at the base of the cliff.

Speed turned slightly, gave the warm, moonlit world one final glance, let his eyes rest for a second upon the figure below, and then gave his undivided attention to the task in hand. It would need all of his strength and skill—all of his concentration.

A newspaper reporter had once christened Speed Dash "The Lord of the High Places," and the title had stuck. It somehow seemed peculiarly appropriate, seemed to fit the man as a suit of tailored clothes.

That afternoon Speed had picked out his course, and his photographic memory had enabled him to retain every feature of that course in his mind. By working first to one side, then back to the other he could manage so there would be only a small part of the distance where he would have to battle with the overhang of the cliff. The question was whether or not he could negotiate that overhang.

Here the lava rocks were irregular in size, usually sloping as to edges, and were sometimes loose. Also the distance was a matter of yards instead of feet.

Speed mastered the first gentle overhang, managed to keep a toe hold, held

against the side of the cliff, gripped the rough surfaces of the rocks. He worked his way slightly to one side, and found himself again on a perpendicular. Quickly he climbed, and then was confronted by the last overhang.

He made his way slowly, carefully, his entire body dripping with perspiration. Small fragments of rock fell upon his upturned face, clinging to the perspiring skin, getting in his eyes, in his nostrils. He had an overpowering desire to sneeze, and knew that the sneeze would be fatal. He fought off the inclination.

As he was working his way upward, so suddenly as to give him no warning, he lost his toe hold. His feet swung out over the drop beneath. Then, to his horror, he felt the rock upon which the fingers of his right hand were gripping, come loose in his grasp, spreading a bit at a time from the surface of the cliff. The cleavage momentarily became wider. The rock tore loose in his grasp as the entire weight of his body dangled from it. It was a good hundred-and-seventy-five feet to the tumbled pile of rocks below, and there was no time for him to inspect the surface of the cliff for another handhold.

The rock pivoted outward, and Speed grasped blindly in the dark with his other hand, and, as the rock came entirely loose, swung his feet desperately inward, toward the jagged surface of the rough ledge.

Even as he swung, he thought of how exasperating it was to have come so near to his goal without achieving it. But ten feet farther and he would have been over the last of the ledge, within the next two feet and he would have been free of the overhang.

And then fortune favored him. The projecting root of a tree had crept down the rough surface of crumbling rock, in search of soil and moisture. It had bowed out into a loop, and his left hand thrust blindly forth in the half darkness had gripped this root. Speed could hold himself for minutes with such a firm handhold.

The rock slipped free from his right hand, hurtled out through the air in a long arc, and then crashed into the thicket below. There sounded the faint scream of a girl.

Speed gathered his breath, gave a reassuring whistle, swung his bare feet inward, caught the surface of the rock, pulled himself upward, and was soon above the overhang, thanks to the friendly root. Ten seconds later and he had made the climb, stood upon the rim of the rocky ledge and waved his hand to the girl below.

Leta Danforth saw him standing there, outlined against the luminous sky, one arm upflung in a gesture of encouragement, and sunk to her knees, tears of relief streaming from her face.

Speed stood there only long enough to make sure that she had seen him. Then he melted into the shadows of the jungle. Almost as he disappeared in the tangled thicket, there sounded, throbbing through the air, the vague, indefinite, intangible sound of the devil-devil drum. It was a deep-booming pulsation of the atmosphere which entered into the blood, synchronized with the beating of the heart. It stirred the emotions with some vague, ominous foreshadowing of evil.

Louder and louder came the rhythmic throbbing of the drum until it deadened the pounding of the surf upon the outer reef, struck dread into the heart of the girl below, emphasizing her loneliness, the terrible predicament in which she was placed. Gathering her skirts, she turned and sprinted blindly through the jungle fringe, seeking to find and comfort her aunt.

Speed found that progress through the upper growth was easier than it had been through the tangled mass of plant life below, and soon set his feet upon a well-beaten trail. A trail which evi-

dently led to a lookout station at the top of the ridge which was above the silver beach below.

To his ears there came the deep booming of the drum. He followed the trail in the direction of that sound. He had no definite plan, but realized that his time was short, that the moon would soon be down, and knew that he must accomplish all of his traveling while there remained some light. It would be worse than hopeless to try and follow a trail through that tropical undergrowth in the dark.

At length the trail dipped sharply into a valley. To his ears there came the sound of running water. And the throbbing of the drum became louder and louder until it set up vibrations within his eardrums, a veritable pulsation of the emotions. A ruddy light flickered through the tops of the trees as he looked down into the valley.

As he watched the light, a dark shadow silhouetted itself against it, sprang upward in a long, scissorslike leap, and blotted out the light of the fire for an instant, then passed. A short interval and another shadow appeared, made a similar leap, blotted out the light of the fire and passed.

The drum boomed faster and faster, yet so imperceptibly did the tempo change that one could appreciate it only by a quickening of the emotional impulses. A strange fire seemed to enter into him and savage emotions stirred within his breast making him long to come to grips with his enemies.

He hurried down the trail, came to the stream, plunged into the cool water, stooped for a swift drink, and then contemplated the scene before him.

CHAPTER IX.

DRIFTING OUT TO DANGER.

THERE was a big fire in the center of a clearing. Ruddy flames flickered against the surrounding trees, giving a weird light which combatted with the soft, steady illumination of the silvery moon. About the fire were circling warriors, naked men who ran a few steps in some weird, crouching dance posture, and then leaped into the air, stretching their legs in a stiff, peculiar motion as they sprang, outflinging arms and throwing up and back their heads.

They seemed trying to remain in the air as long as possible. So great was the glamour of the scene, the savage surroundings, the throbbing of the devil-devil drum, that they actually appeared to remain at the top of their leap, suspended for an appreciable interval. Then the legs came together, the arms dropped to the side of the dancer, and once more he shuffled along in the strange, crouching posture.

Running around the inside of the circle, between the men and the fire, going in an opposite direction to the circling dancers, appeared a weird, uncanny figure, wearing a great mask head upon its shoulders. The head had evidently been grotesquely carved from a hollow tree. Large white eyes peered from this head, vermilion cheeks, blue lips and white streaked forehead added to the awe-inspiring miracle. Hempen hair, dyed in strange colors, fluttered and floated in the breeze.

A necklace of bones rattled from the chest of the dancer. About his waist was a gruesome string of other bones which kept up a devil's castanet as the witch doctor wriggled and swayed through the gyrations of the dance.

Constantly the booming of the big drum became faster.

Speed turned and began to slip downstream, following the course of the water, because in this manner he could avoid becoming lost in the entangling forest. Also he knew that he would be approaching the ocean.

He desired to see whether the boats were still standing off the island. Somehow he felt that this dance would not have been staged had the white men

sailed away—that the natives were nerving themselves to an attack, going through the weird ceremonial of a religious dance.

The moon slipped lower and lower. In Northern climes it swings in a slanting arc toward the horizon. Here in the tropics it descended abruptly, straight toward the rim of golden ocean which awaited it. To Speed's Northern eyes it seemed that the moon must be sliding down a greased incline.

Stumbling, slipping over smooth stones, at times plunged entirely underneath the purling waters, he thrashed his way down the stream toward the place where he knew the water must enter the ocean. Above him the gnarled branches of twisting trees, the twining vines of huge creepers, the broad foliage of tropical plants shone in the waning moonlight.

About him swirled the waters. For once in his life, Speed Dash was without a definite plan. Working against time, he was trusting to dame fortune to give him some opportunity for action. He felt enough self-confidence to believe that he could render a good account of himself in any such action, and, to spur him on, there sounded the booming of the war drum vibrating through the warm, spice-laden air.

He moved on toward the ocean, alone, unarmed, yet filled with that determination to accomplish something which overcomes all opposition. In such manner did Speed Dash come to the place where the waters of the stream became deep and sluggish, opened into a quiet little bay into which there rippled a miniature surf.

As he came to this bay the half moon slipped quietly below the horizon, swallowed up in a path of golden fire. For a moment its waning light illuminated the form of a lone yacht which sat light as a bird upon the water, anchored some half mile from the shore.

Speed's eyes, trained for details, always remembering anything they had once observed, recognized the ship as that in which José Gallardo had come to the island.

So much he saw, and then the moon was gone. The stars seemed to abruptly find themselves, to blaze down with majestic splendor, while the war drum burst into a veritable ecstasy of impassioned throbbing.

The boat was half a mile away, and for the ordinary man might as well have been a million. The patrolling sharks would account for a swimmer before he had made his way a hundred yards into the warm waters. Yet Speed was determined to try it.

It was a question of staking everything upon one determined effort, and he could not fail now. Either he would accomplish something or he would be dead before the sun should rise in the morning. It was not a part of his temperament or his philosophy to wait for something to happen, to play the game of life with a limit.

As Speed slipped into the deep water of the ocean, and prepared to strike out in a long swim for the yacht, his eye, upon a level with the water, noticed what appeared to be several logs resting upon the surface. They were drawn up near the beach. Something about them caused him to hesitate and then his eye followed the curving lines, and saw that they were canoes of the type he had seen the savages use earlier in the day.

Quickly he changed his course and slipped out to these canoes, studying them, watching the shore to see if there was any watcher on guard.

Closer inspection showed that the canoes were tied by a braided rope to a long pole which stretched along the water. In turn, the pole was tied to the shore, thereby giving a rude mooring float which would rise and fall with the tide.

Speed became convinced that the canoes were unguarded, reached over

the end and pulled himself into one of them. Here he found paddles, but no weapons, nor were the paddles of sufficient weight to make good clubs. However, the canoes and paddles gave him a better opportunity to get to the boat on which Gallardo and his men were. That was all that he asked for. Once aboard and the weapons could take care of themselves.

Quickly, Speed cast loose all of the canoes, giving to each of them a long, steady push, hoping that the light, offshore wind would carry them in close proximity of the yacht. Then, lying flat in the bottom of the last canoe, he set himself adrift, well at the end of the procession of empty canoes which were slipping silently out over the dark waters.

The war drum had reached the crescendo, bursting out with a furious fervor of throbbing beats, and then abruptly died away. Unlike the previous evening it had not gradually tapered off, but had suddenly ceased, stopped with dramatic quickness.

Accustomed to the steady, deep booming of the drum, the nervous system felt out of harmony. He noticed a subtle missing something. Yet the savagery remained within. In such a manner did the savages nerve themselves to the attack.

Sounds carried clearly over the quiet waters, and suddenly Speed, lying in the bottom of the canoe, heard the voice of José Gallardo sounding startlingly close.

"That's the end of the war dance. They'll be coming any minute now."

Again there was silence, a silence broken only by the distant crash of the surf, the lapping ripples of waves against the side of the canoe. Then there sounded abruptly the vicious spat of a rifle.

"What is it?" Gallardo's voice sounded almost overhead.

"Canoe," came the reply in the swift tones of Ferdinand Gonzales. "There's another one." *Bang! Bang! Bang!*

"Here, wait a minute, here's one of 'em coming alongside!" exclaimed Gallardo. "Hold everything. Let's take a look at 'em!"

There was a moment's nerve-racking silence, while Speed wondered if he had made a miscalculation, if it was his canoe that the men were inspecting; and then there sounded over the water, the scraping of a canoe against the side of the vessel.

"Empty!" said Gallardo.

"They're all loose," agreed Ferdinand Gonzales. "What luck!"

José Gallardo laughed.

"I'll bet some one slipped when it came to mooring 'em up. They were so excited they couldn't tie a knot that'd hold."

Speed chanced discovery by elevating one eye slightly above the gunwale of the canoe. He had timed things nicely. The set of wind and tide had drifted the canoes down to the yacht, and they all showed, vague, ghostly shapes bobbing upon the rippling surface. The yacht was farther away than he had imagined, and it was because of the clearness with which sounds carried across the water that he had been able to hear.

And then from the shore there sounded a veritable volcano of noise. The savages had discovered the loss of their canoes, and the resulting yell left no doubt but that the loss came as a cruel blow to them, was no part of savage strategy.

"Checkmated!" exulted Gallardo. "We've got 'em checkmated. They're cooped up on the island and every canoe they own is drifting out to sea. It'll be a day or two before they can get any of 'em back, and, in the meantime, we'll have a chance to slip around to the cove and scoop up *our* prizes."

Ferdinand Gonzales raised a note of warning.

"Let's not go too fast. We can wait until morning. I'm afraid of that detective. There's something uncanny about him."

"He's a slick one," agreed Gallardo, "but we've got 'em where we want 'em. They'll be wanting water, and when we land the small boat and yell for 'em to come aboard they'll come walking down the beach. Any resistance this bird, Dash, may plan will be after he gets close to the boat.

"We want the women. We don't want Dash. We'll wait until he's walking up, and then we'll shoot him. The sharks'll dispose of him all right. Come on. Let's go! It was sure a dandy hunch letting the women go off in the *Cloud*.

"Sam Baxter naturally thought that was the boat he was after because he knew she belonged to me. He thought this sloop was just another vessel that had dropped in. With a breeze such as we had this afternoon he can chase the *Cloud* for a week without catching her. Up anchor, and let's start."

CHAPTER X.

"UP ANCHOR."

THERE came the rattle of the anchor chain as the men strained at it. Dark shapes flitted over the deck, and then the sail was raised, and the boat slipped smoothly over the water like a huge, white ghost. She rounded the point and disappeared into the bay where the prisoners had been left.

Speed sat erect, grasped a paddle, and exerted every ounce of his splendid strength, making the canoe fairly hiss through the water, following in the wake of the yacht as rapidly as was possible. He had hoped to get aboard her before they should change their anchorage, and this move filled him with alarm.

Would he be in time? And if he did arrive in the lagoon could he sneak up on the boat and get aboard without being discovered? It was not a case of having one canoe scrape against the side when the water was covered with drifting, empty canoes, but was a case of paddling directly for the craft. However, there was no use in thinking, nothing to be gained by worrying. He could only act.

He rounded the point, caught the dark outline of the cove, saw the rim of lava rock looming against the star-studded sky, and saw the yacht at anchor. Hearing the scrape of oars on oarlocks, he knew that the men had gone ashore for their prisoners. Now that the natives could not come upon them while they were effecting a recapture of the two women, there was no need for delay, and Gallardo was intending to waste no time.

The boat grounded, there came the sound of a hail, and the beam of an electric flash light stabbed through the gloom. Speed threw caution to the winds and bent to the paddle, urging every inch of speed possible from his craft. He realized that these brutes were ashore, were about to take the two women back aboard the boat, and once aboard her——

Then Speed saw that he would be too late. The beam of the flash light had caught and held two white-clad figures who were standing on the beach. Leta Danforth and her aunt were in the power of the outlaws. Perhaps they thought Speed Dash was in the skiff, perhaps they had realized the folly of trying to long evade capture by hiding in the narrow strip of tangled jungle growth.

The beam of the flash light would have soon detected them and to have acknowledged fear by hiding might have but made things the worse. Perhaps, after all, the best course would be to fearlessly and boldly face the outlaws. Speed shuddered.

How little these two women realized the cruel nature of the men who had

grasped them, who were leading them to the skiff.

Another thought came to him. If he could not reach the shore in time, he could still reach the sloop before the return of the loaded skiff. There would, of course, be some delay while the men made a search for him on the shore. Even if the women should say that he had escaped the men would not believe them. Those overhanging walls seemed too much of a natural trap to permit of an escape.

Apparently there were three men left on the yacht, three specimens of the beach comber who could be called upon to engage in any enterprise, no matter how unsavory. As Speed drew closer he could see these men, their eyes riveted upon the drama which was being enacted upon the strip of beach.

They had neither eyes nor ears for what was transpiring about them. Now that the menace of the savages had been disposed of, the men aboard the piratical sloop concentrated their attention upon the beach.

The canoe rubbed slightly against the side of the vessel. One of the crew turned red-rimmed, dissipated eyes toward the rail, spat a stream of yellow tobacco juice over the side, and then started toward the stern. "Somethin' rubbed against th' side," he remarked.

His companions watched him listlessly for a moment, and then turned again toward the shore, watching, listening, rum-sodden, leering.

Over the rail of the boat there shot a swift, hard something in white, naked to the waist, bounding about on bare feet like a rubber ball. A gun flared in the dark. The man who had discharged the weapon suddenly became entangled with the swift-moving white apparition which had swarmed over the rail of the sloop. He struggled for a moment, and then catapulted up in the air, slipped out and over the side, gave a wild, gurgling yell, and splashed into the water.

Before the other two could well grasp the situation, Speed was upon them, nor had he so much as hesitated to grasp the revolver which the first of the crew had fired. The war drums of the savages were ringing in his ears. He was fighting as he had lived, with his bare hands, hands that were as powerful as crooked talons of tempered steel. No whisky-sodden hulk of the water front, no lazy lotus eater of tropical isles could hope to compete with such a whirlwind of clean-living sinew.

It was soon over. There had been but the one shot fired. One of the crew had sought to use a knife, but even as his arm had shot downward his wrist had been grasped in a vise. Fingers which had been used to bear up a hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight merely by gripping a smooth piece of ornamental stone had made short work of flabby muscles.

In the skiff the men had turned at the sound of that shot, had watched the outline of the yacht, had heard nothing other than the one shot.

"The crew are brawling," muttered Gallardo with an oath.

Ferdinand Gonzales twisted his evil face into a leer.

"Perhaps we had better treat them to a little discipline before we take the women aboard."

Gallardo's face darkened. "You remain here," he snapped to the women; then turned to the two oarsmen, his voice harsh and commanding.

"Back to the boat, you scum. If your comrades are brawling at a time like this—well, you shall see."

Swiftly the skiff shoved off and started for the sloop.

Halfway to the yacht and a rifle spat. A board splintered in the side of the skiff.

"Faster!" urged Gallardo, himself grasping an oar.

Swiftly, rapidly, methodically, the gun continued its fire. Ferdinand Gonzales

returned the fire, but saw that he could do nothing against the concealed enemy.

"It's a mutiny," he said, "and they are behind the gunwale, firing in perfect safety. The bullets are going through this boat like so much cardboard. They're not trying to hit us, but to sink the boat."

José Gallardo grasped the situation. The boat was filling with water.

"Bail!" he shouted, dropping his oar and grasping a bucket. "We'll never make it back to the shore. Swing around that headland!"

The skiff changed its course, two of the men frantically bailing, the other two bending to the oars, and the phosphorescent wake of a trailing shark showed in the water to the side of the boat. The firing from the yacht had ceased.

The men in the skiff swept swiftly around the point of projecting lava, landed upon the beach and dragged the skiff up after them.

"Quick!" shouted Gallardo. "Up the height above the bay here, and we can pick them off as they try to raise the anchor. We've got the only skiff and they can't get off the sloop."

The men grasped their two rifles and sprinted up the side of the lava ledge.

Speed was once more in the war canoe, paddling for the shore, calling to the two white figures who were standing knee-deep in the water of the lagoon.

"Hurry!" panted Gallardo as he dragged himself upward. "We must get them before they can raise the anchor. We can't escape in the skiff, and the island's full of infuriated cannibals. We killed a couple last trip just to show our authority and keep 'em from being too curious, and they're up in arms—here—watch out for that clump of brush! Back in this way—there's an overhang there—hurry!"

Seconds lengthened into minutes. In the dark night, brush loomed up too late to be avoided, precious time was lost. The lava cap proved higher, more difficult to ascend than they had anticipated. At length, José Gallardo, arch conspirator, burst his way through, stood panting on the ridge, hugging his rifle, looking down upon the lagoon.

A shriveling curse escaped his twisted lips. Below him, the yacht, like a live thing, sails set, was slipping through the water. Speed had slipped the anchor chain shackle bolt as soon as he had placed the women aboard.

Aboard the vessel, Speed looked back at the island, grinned approvingly at the businesslike manner in which Leta Danforth was guiding the vessel while Speed's sinewed fingers hauled on the lines, trimmed the sails. He took in the tight-lipped aunt who had pulled on the jib tackle, and blessed the custom which had made yachting a sport of the idle rich.

"Listen!" called the girl.

From the island behind them came once more the steady triumphant booming of the war drum.

All of which is why there is upon Speed's desk in his skyscraper office a miniature gold chest, made after the fashion of a pirate's treasure chest, and engraved with the words *"To the Lord of the High Places."* Beneath these words there appears an engraved heart and within the heart are the initials of the donor. It was in this chest that Speed received from Leta Danforth the check which marked his payment for "services rendered."

If Speed refrained from mentioning the significance of the initialed heart it was perhaps because he felt that a maid could never know her own mind until after the glamour of the romantic adventure had been dissipated in the light of every-day existence. Or, perhaps, because he realized that a detective who must risk his life in his calling should not become sentimental.

Be that as it may, the amount of the check was such as to show that his services were keenly appreciated.

The Fourth Warning

By Vic Whitman

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

AT THE FIRE.

WITH a rush and roar and a deafening bark of exhausts two big red trucks shot out of the southern fire station and thundered down the avenue, sirens shrieking for the right of way. Hurrying people on the sidewalks stopped and turned to watch. Small boys gaped and then ran shouting behind, while traffic officers took one look and with energetic sweeps of their arms sent everything to the curbs.

Standing on a running board of the long hook and ladder was Jerry Burke, small, wiry, and hard-boiled, with a flashing grin and a freckled face. Under the helmet that he wore, his blue eyes, narrowed against the rush of the wind, fastened themselves upon the thick black smoke that was smudging the horizon; then turned upon the big red-faced man standing next him.

"Looks like she's got a good start," he said shouting. "Boy, we'll have some fun if she has!"

Pete Murphy, as big as an ox and as strong as a moose, snorted. "Fun!" he bellowed. "Where d'ye get that stuff! Lay off, Jerry, you've got two warnin's already."

Burke grinned up at him. "I s'pose you're figurin' I'm goin' to get my third to-day!" he retorted. "I never saw such a guy as you! G'wan away from me!"

Murphy clutched at a chemical to maintain his balance as the truck skidded around a curve, missing a stalled roadster by inches.

"I know you don't put much stock in warnin's," he answered, "but you keep your eyes peeled just the same. When the third warnin' comes, it'll come good. And there ain't ever any fourth warnin', remember that. No, sir, there ain't ever any fourth warnin'."

There was significance in what Murphy said, significance that was based upon the superstitions of the service. Fire is a deadly foe, a personal foe, and when one is too successful in fighting it, it expresses its resent-

ment in three warnings. The first an injurious fall or bruise, the second a narrow escape from death, and the third either death or some form of bodily mangling that would make death preferable. Compromise is unknown, so say the old-timers, and the life of man is very trivial.

Though Jerry Burke had been in the service but a short time he had displayed such aptitude and such unconcern that he had drawn down upon himself the wrath of the fire gods. He had already received two warnings—the last of which had laid him up for two weeks.

Besides belonging to the younger crop of fire fighters who do not believe in such things, Burke had always taken life as it came. Carefree, and as tough as leather, he had always let the morrow take care of itself.

"Let 'er rip!" he said, and grinned. "But I'm givin' you odds of ten to two that it don't get me to-day. What d'ye say?"

Murphy shook his head impatiently. Many times had he seen these things work out, and not for worlds would he have encouraged this boy to flaunt himself in the face of disaster. He turned away, his eyes riveted to the sky line that was growing more menacing each moment.

Around two more corners raced the trucks, and then came the smell of smoke, pungent and strong. Jerry Burke fell silent, his eyes lighting with the eagerness of the coming battle. The siren whirred, rose on a deafening shriek, and died away, and the hook and ladder pounded into a little square that was rapidly filling with people.

"Baby boy!" exclaimed Burke, as he took in the situation. "Look at that shack burn, Pete! What time did you say you had to meet your sister?"

"Four o'clock train," muttered the big man, "and it's about two now. I'll never make it with this blaze." He looked once more at Burke before he leaped from the slowing truck. "Now you mark my words and be careful to-day, get me?"

Certainly the prospect was forbidding enough. An old building, the lower half of which was occupied by a combination drug store and chemical laboratory, was blazing merrily and spurting forth smoke from doors and windows. Great tongues of flame crawled and leaped and writhed from timber to timber, now and then lashing out viciously to one side as though at some unseen antagonist.

Smoke, now black, now gray, billowed out like huge waves from the street floor. The blasts of heat could be felt upon the opposite sidewalk. Sparks whirled upward on the drafts, and the owners of adjoining houses cast anxious eyes to their rooftops.

Almost before the apparatus had stopped, gray-haired old Chief Kennedy, from his position in the middle of the street, was bellowing his orders through cupped hands:

"Get them safety ropes stretched! Murphy, hustle up and clear the buildin'! Get 'em all out, and don't go by a locked door! Kick it down if ye have to, but be sure the people are out! Mac, order up two o' them ladders, one on the north and one on the west! Quick! All right! Jerry, scoot in and locate the base o' the blaze! Fast, lad, fast!"

CHAPTER II.

THE THIRD WARNING.

BURKE nodded and dashed into the drug store where men of the flying squadron were already hard at work amid the swirling smoke, covering perishables with rubber blankets. He stopped for a moment to look around him. His eyes, alert to everything, noted smoke that was sifting up from the basement, and he yanked open a

door that led down. A puff of black-and-yellow smoke shot up.

Burke blinked.

"Monoxide gas!" he muttered. "Bad stuff!"

He hurried down the stairs, looked at a licking, darting bed of flames, saw the remnants of a pile of oil-soaked rags, and rushed back up the stairs.

"In the left o' the basement, chief!" he reported. "Looks like spontaneous combustion! She's goin' like a million at the base, but I guess two lines'll hold 'er! And the place is full o' monoxide gas, too!"

"All right, lad!" barked Chief Kennedy. "Now go up and ventilate! Get Murphy to help you! He's up there somewhere! Watch them chemicals in there; they're bad and dangerous!"

The chief whirled to inspect the lines of hose that twisted across the street, and his stentorian order rang along the road to the hydrant men: "All r-r-right! Let go the water!"

Spat! With a hiss the water shot from the nozzles and slapped into the blaze. Clouds of steam arose to mingle with the smoke. Glowing embers turned suddenly black. For a moment the fire wavered, then like some monster that will not be denied, it raged with fresh strength, eating into the walls with avaricious appetite. A timber fell in a galaxy of sparks, and a plate-glass window crashed into a thousand fragments.

Burke's eyes shone as he saw. The little ladderman loved anything like this that savored of action.

"Ain't this the honey!" he murmured, as he lowered his head and plunged into the smoke, inhaling deeply his first whiff to "set" his lungs. "Monoxide gas and chemicals and a red-hot blaze! Wow!"

Grinning joyously, he kicked out three windows and opened a door, then yelled for Murphy. Faintly the big man's answer reached his ears:

"Down here, Jerry! End o' the corridor!"

Burke cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Ventilate!" he shouted. "Chief's orders! Kick 'em out everywhere!"

No answer came this time, and he peered anxiously through the smoke at the red glow beyond. It was evident that the fire was raging hotly at the end of the corridor, and he wondered how Pete Murphy was standing it.

"Pete!" he yelled. "Did you hear me?"

Still no answer, so he started along the corridor, weaving his way through the dense smoke, once jumping over a patch of flame that crackled angrily at him. He hoped that Murphy was all right, but the big man was so slow-going that it was a wonder he hadn't been killed a dozen times before.

Suddenly the insidious smell of monoxide gas came to him, and he stopped.

"It's got Pete!" Burke thought, his freckled face blanching. "Sure as hell it's got him!"

For a moment the smoke cleared away on the drafts. Burke saw that he was in a little laboratory, recognizable by the bottle-filled shelves and the glass test tubes. He saw, too, the prone form of big Pete Murphy, helmet half knocked off his head by his fall, lying by one of the sinks.

Instantly, Burke sprang forward, holding his breath as best he could. Well he knew that there was no time to lose. If Murphy had inhaled enough of that monoxide the air would shrivel his lungs like dead leaves before a forest fire, when he got outside. But Burke knew Murphy had not been in long enough for that to happen—yet.

In his leap to the aid of his friend, the little ladderman tripped over an old pan that was lying on the floor, and went lunging into one of the shelves. He did not notice the crash of bottles breaking on the floor, nor the fumes

that started to lift. He was interested in only one thing, and that was getting Pete Murphy out.

As, with infinite effort, he managed to raise the big form to his shoulder, the irony of the thing struck him. It was Pete Murphy who had cautioned him against his third warning, and here it was the big man who was getting a warning instead of himself. Burke could not repress a grin as he staggered toward the door with his burden.

His aching lungs demanded relief. He gulped down a lungful of the smoke-filled air. At once came a stinging tickle in his throat. He stopped, coughing violently, almost dropping Murphy to the floor.

What was that new odor that was asserting itself, unlike anything he had ever smelled before? He looked toward the door. The door seemed to be swimming in a dense mist. Vague alarm filled him.

"What the devil ails my eyes!" he thought. "Maybe those bottles I knocked off the shelf."

He winked his eyes rapidly, trying to clear away the mist, but the mist thickened. Under the lids now was a smarting like the sting of a thousand tiny needles. The door blurred and became a thing of darkness.

CHAPTER III.

DOOMED TO DARKNESS.

AHEAD of him he heard hurrying footsteps, and then the voice of Chief Kennedy: "What's the matter in here, Burke? Murphy knocked out? Here, I'll give ye a lift. Let's go, this monoxide is wicked!"

"I—I can't seem to see, chief," said Burke uncertainly. "My eyes—I don't know——"

The chief came closer and looked. Burke heard a gasp, and then a mutter as though the chief were talking to himself:

"Bromine, and somethin' else!"

Then the weight of Murphy was removed from Burke's shoulders. The chief said hurriedly:

"Take hold o' my coat, lad, and hang to it! There! Now I'll just go along out slow and tell ye when to step over anythin' that's in the way! Don't be worried because ye can't see! It's only somethin' that'll pass in a little while!"

To Jerry Burke, stumbling along, hanging tightly to the chief's rubber coat, there was doubt, horrible doubt. The third warning, Murphy had said, and there never was any fourth. His eyes, how they smarted and burned, echoing the sting in his throat! Maybe, after all, the old-timers were right. The third warning, and never any fourth!

Outside and clear of the burning building, he stood waiting while the chief turned the still unconscious Murphy over to some of his subordinates. The flames crackled on, fighting the rushing water, and the sound seemed to contain something of evil joy. Anger drove back the fear that was fighting for control of Jerry Burke. Damn the flames! But they hadn't got him yet, for he was still on his feet.

Even in his plight it was characteristic of Jerry Burke that he should feel greatly relieved when he heard the chief say to some one:

"Murphy's all right. He didn't get enough o' that monoxide to hurt him! He'll be as fit as a fiddle in an hour or so."

Then Burke's head became very dizzy, and inconsequential things went through his mind. Too bad that Pete wouldn't be able to meet his sister—— From all reports she was a knock-out! How many lines of hose were out and who was on the nozzle of No. 1? In a day or so now he'd be back on the old job. It was a great life——

Queer little pinwheels of fire seemed

flashing in the darkness ahead of him and all around him. The chief from miles away was saying something to somebody or other about a mixture of bromine and another kind of chemical getting to his eyes, and suggesting that he be rushed to one of those big-time docs that they called specialists. What difference did it all make? He was dizzy and tired and he wanted to lie down. Those pinwheels of fire in the darkness——

Slowly, the legs of Jerry Burke bent under him. He crumpled to the ground in a heap.

He came to in his bunk in the southern station. Automatically his eyelids drew back, but only darkness surrounded him now, the flashing bits of fire were no more. For a bare second he longed to cry out, to shriek at the top of his lungs with the terror of it, then the taut nerves relaxed and his jaw squared.

Men were moving in the room, stepping softly as though fearful of disturbing him, and talking in quick little whispers. He wished they'd talk loud and laugh. Those whispers sounded forbidding and strained. He sighed and moved on his bunk.

"How's Pete?" he asked of the darkness. "Did he come out of it all jake?"

A stir, a step, and a big body sitting down on Burke's bunk.

"You bet your life he came out of it all jake," said Pete Murphy's voice huskily. "He's owin' it to you, too, kid, don't forget that!"

That was good. He sure was glad that Pete was all right. But the tone of Pete's voice made him feel uncomfortable.

"Aw, lay off!" he said sheepishly, and then another thought occurred to him. "Did you wake up in time to meet your sister at the train?" he inquired.

"No." Apparently the question surprised Pete. "But she found me all right. She was some worried at first, but I told her it wasn't anythin', so she calmed down."

"Uh-huh." The knowledge seemed to relieve Burke, for a faint smile appeared on his lips.

More footsteps and a gruff, professional voice saying: "So this is the lad who's having trouble with his eyes, eh? Well, well, we'll have a look. Now just draw back those lids slowly—that's it—there! Does that show any kind of light?"

Fingers exploring his lids, more questions, and then more whispers. Presently some one left the room, and Burke knew it was the specialist.

"Chief?" he said anxiously.

"Yes, lad."

"What did the doc have to say? Gimme the low-down."

"Well, he said—he said——" The chief coughed slightly, obviously reluctant to continue.

"On the level, chief, now. Come clean and don't hold nothin' back."

"Well, he said——" The chief hated to break the news. "He didn't seem to hold out much hope, Jerry lad. Said somethin' about a combination o' acids burnin' the vision away."

Burke came up on one elbow, his hands clenched so tightly that the knuckles showed white.

"Did he say I'd be—be blind for good?"

Silence from the chief for a long moment, then: "Later on, he said ye might be able to see. Just now it don't look very good. He said somethin' about your bein' able to see if a miracle happened, but——"

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED PLEASURE.

WHAT the kind old chief was trying to tell him, Jerry Burke understood. Blind, permanently blind! That was the size of it. Blind unless

a miracle happened! His overloaded brain sought relief in detachment and he pondered the word. A miracle! Those things were few and far between, but maybe——

Realization came with stunning force. Death had no terrors for the little ladderman, but this! Yes, Pete Murphy had been right. This was his third warning, and there couldn't be a fourth. Slowly, Burke's tongue went over his dry lips. He hardly heard the chief's words, spoken in the realization that they were barren of comfort:

"Ye'll be receivin' your full salary right along in addition to a disability pension. The commissioners are white in this town. And some o' the boys'll be droppin' in on ye all the time. Cheer up, lad, 'tis not as bad as it seems."

Jerry Burke drew a deep, sobbing breath. As he tried to grin, tears came to the eyes of Chief Kennedy and the silently watching Pete Murphy.

"You said it, chief," the little ladderman answered. "It ain't such a tough break to be still alive—so you won't hear me do no kickin'."

The next day at his own request he was removed to the little room he had occupied before joining the fire department. It was not so bad there, for the room was sunny and warm and the landlady looked upon him as though he were her own son, doing everything for his comfort that she could.

As he sat by the window he could not believe that he was doomed to be blind for the rest of his life. He *would* not believe it. His mind, as healthy and elastic as his tough little body, was not at all receptive to such broodings.

"They can't get away with that stuff!" he told himself again and again. "Some day this baby's goin' to see again, and I don't mean if! The fourth warnin' may never come, like Pete said, but it's goin' to have a rattlin' good chance. You're happy right!"

A hesitant knock on the door interrupted his reflections.

"Come in," he called, and the door opened.

"Is this Mr. Burke?"

The voice was soft, golden.

"Yes'm," he answered wonderingly. "It sure is."

The voice came nearer. "I'm Betty Murphy," it said. "I wanted so badly to see the man who rescued my brother that I couldn't wait until Pete got off duty to bring me over. You see, I am staying at Simpson's—the very next house."

"Are you Miss Murphy, honest?" exclaimed Burke, sitting up straight in his chair. "Say, I've heard a lot about you!" He fumbled apologetically with the dark glasses he wore. "You'll have to excuse me for not gettin' up. You see——"

"I understand," said the girl quickly. "Please don't try to move." Gratitude was in her tone as she went on: "It was wonderful of you to risk your life to save my brother, and I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate it."

Jerry Burke's face reddened. "Aw, say now," he protested, "it was just what any one else would o' done, Miss Murphy. Let's talk about somethin' else."

"I know all about it," the soft voice continued. "Pete told me the story. It was one of the bravest, most unselfish things I ever heard of to walk straight into that poison gas."

Now, more than ever, Jerry Burke longed for his sight. He had never seen Betty Murphy, but he knew men who had. Their opinion was that she was exceptionally lovely, silken-haired, red-cheeked, and soft-eyed. Her voice confirmed this opinion. Rich, low, and melodious with some vibrant quality, it stirred him as nothing else ever had.

Yet he could not help feeling that she pitied him, and pity was something he did not want. It had never occurred

to the hard-boiled little ladderman that pity was often the doorway to deeper emotions. Perhaps this was because he was so utterly sincere, and never concerned himself about such matters.

He grinned now, rather confusedly, and tried to lighten the conversation.

"It's sort of a fool thing to say," he began, "but I wonder if you're like the picture o' you I got in mind?"

Being feminine, Betty seized upon the first part of his remark.

"Why is it a fool thing to say?" she asked. "I don't think it is at all."

"I take it back," said Jerry promptly. "I don't think it is now, either."

Betty laughed. "Aren't you nice!" she exclaimed. "Just what is the picture like?"

Jerry threw back his head and reflected. "Now I don't just know," he confessed. "I got a hunch that you're not very big, and that you got light, sort o' wavy hair, and that you're about the keenest-lookin' girl any guy ever looked at."

"My goodness!" cried Betty. "Isn't the man complimentary! That's a difficult picture to live up to, do you know that?"

Jerry nodded. "Maybe it is," he said. "but I guess you can, all right. Anyway, I know you're mighty nice."

Had Jerry Burke been able to see Miss Murphy he would never have had the courage to talk to her this way. But the darkness was like a wall between them, through which self-consciousness could not penetrate. Betty seemed to understand.

"I think I can say the same thing about you," she said quietly.

"D'ye mean that, honest?"

"Why, surely I mean it."

Silence fell, silence that at length became awkward to Miss Murphy.

"Would you like me to read to you?" she asked. "I brought a book along in case——"

"Read?" repeated Jerry, aroused from his reverie. "Sure thing, miss, I'd be tickled to death."

CHAPTER V.

THE VOICE OF AN UNSEEN ANGEL.

SO Betty Murphy opened the book she had and began to read. Jerry leaned back in his chair and listened. Afterward he could not have told what it was she had been reading. He only heard the tones of her soft, golden voice as they rippled on, soothing him.

In about an hour she laid the book aside and asked him how he liked the story.

"Great!" was his fervent comment. "Say, it was perfect!"

"Then you'll let me read again to you?"

"Will I!" exclaimed Jerry raptly. "*Will* I! You bet I will! When'll you come again?"

"Well, I might come over to-morrow——"

"Will you, honest? Say, I'll be lookin' for you all day until you get here!"

When Betty Murphy went out, closing the door quietly behind her, Jerry leaned back in his chair and his expression was far from being one of depression.

Thus it was that a new life began for Jerry Burke, former expert ladderman of the southern fire station. The process of adjustment was very slow and very hard, particularly to one who had been so active as Jerry, but he made the best of it and submitted to the inevitable.

Where many another man would have become gloomy, Jerry's nature kept him in reasonably good spirits. His philosophy was simple and effective and characteristic—if the breaks were tough, they were bound to change sooner or later.

Perhaps the most poignant of the drawbacks was that of having to sit

still in his chair and listen to the big, red trucks go thundering by on the line, answering the blast of a whistle. But whenever they went down his street, Joe Denny, the driver of the hook and ladder, would give an extra long wind to the siren and the men would roar out greetings.

At such moments, leaning out the window, his jaw set, his whole body athrill with the call of the nozzle, Jerry would wave in answer, the while trying to repress the lump that came up in his throat.

Yet there were compensations. Men of the southern station were continually dropping in on him during their off hours to take him out on long drives or to sit talking with him. Particularly often came big Pete Murphy, who, in his way, worshiped the smiling, freckle-faced little ladderman. And strange it was that Pete who, before, had been so insistent that Jerry would get his third warning, now declared that Burke would regain his sight.

"I got a hunch, kid," he gave as his only explanation. "Maybe it sounds foolish when that big doc said different, but I can't help believin' it."

Jerry smiled. "But that would be sort of a fourth warnin', Pete," he pointed out, "and you said them things never came."

Murphy nodded his ponderous head earnestly. "I know," he admitted. " 'Twould be little short o' a miracle, but—that hunch sticks with me."

Jerry shrugged, then laughed. "Well, you just hang right onto that hunch, big boy," he directed. "It won't make me a bit mad if it works out."

By far the brightest bit of light in all the darkness was Betty Murphy. Every day she came up to see him, and read to him. Shortly after the big clock across the square had boomed twice he would hear her light step on the stairs, and then a gentle knock at the door.

To one who cannot see, things resolve themselves into more or less of a formula, and for Jerry all things began with the striking of the clock.

Not being at all introspective he did not try to analyze his feelings for her. It was enough to sit and listen to the soft cadences of her voice, or join in with her musical laughter.

And Betty had the true mother instinct. She fussed over Jerry as though he were a child, scolded him gently when she thought he needed it. She smoothed out his pillow with tender little pats, and kept solicitous eyes upon him, doing little things that she thought would make him more content with his lot.

CHAPTER VI.

FIRE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

ALL things, though, must pass, and one day Betty said hesitantly as though dreading to say it: "Jerry, I—I've got to go home to-morrow."

Burke stiffened in his chair. Betty leaving! He had known dimly that sooner or later she would have to go, but he had refused to think about it. Now it burst upon him with the suddenness of a bombshell.

Realization came, then, that he loved this golden-voiced girl whose image he idealized in his own mind, and with it the knowledge that he could not tell her about it, knowledge that seared and was bitter.

He did not answer her. He could not. He simply sat dumbly, his mouth set in a wistful little twist.

That expression tugged at Betty's heartstrings.

"Don't look like that, Jerry!" she pleaded. "Please!"

He tried to smile. "That don't mean anythin'," he managed to say. "It's just 'cause I'm sorry to see you go, that's all."

"And I'm sorry, too," she said swiftly. Had he but known it her eyes

were very tender as they rested upon him. Perhaps because of the tenderness, and because words came flowing to her lips that she had difficulty in restraining, she rose quickly.

"I'll be over again before I go, Jerry," she said. "I'm a little tired now, and I think I'll go over to the house and take a nap."

She put out one slim, cool hand, half fearfully touched his hair and fled out of the room.

Left alone, Jerry Burke arose and paced back and forth for many minutes over a space of ten feet. He had to move about—it would have driven him crazy to sit still. For the first time since putting on the dark glasses he gave way to despair.

"It ain't fair!" he groaned. "It ain't fair, and I didn't do nothin' to deserve this! If I could only see her once before she goes I'd be satisfied! Just once! The doc said if a miracle happened I might be able to see! I just want an even break! All I want is just one little look at her, and after that I'll never kick any more!"

It was then that a sound reached his ears which caused him to stop his pacing and stand motionless, listening with back-thrown head—the distant booming of the fire whistle over the southern station. How well he knew that sound, how many times he had jumped at its call!

It seemed bitterly ironical that it should make itself heard at the moment when his soul was in blackest despair, but sounding it was and Jerry obeyed its summons as best he could. With hands outstretched he groped his way to the window, and leaned out.

One—two—three—those menacing notes welled forth; a pause; one—two—three—four.

"Thirty-four," he muttered. "Why, that's in this neighborhood somewhere!"

His nostrils twitched. Wasn't that the thin, penetrating smell of burning wood? He leaned farther out of the window, his excitement growing. Down below he could hear voices babbling incoherently, people running, and then some one shouting:

"It's Simpson's house, and it's blazing like the devil! Doubt if the firemen'll be able to stop it! No! No! Don't go in! It's dangerous! That's all right, there's nobody in there, anyway! The family went away for the day!"

Simpson's house, next door! And Betty was inside taking a nap! Burke's face became white. He shouted:

"Sure there's some one up there—a girl sleepin'! Somebody go up and get her out!"

Although the noise below increased, no answering shout came to tell Burke he had been heard. Angrily he raged, his hands tight, clenched:

"Are you all dead down there! There's a girl up in that house, I tell you! Get wise to yourself, for the love o'——"

Far down the street he could hear faintly the shrieking of a siren. The old apparatus was out and coming. But the distance was over a mile. By the time the men got there, it might be too late. In a paroxysm of helplessness, Burke drummed frantically on the window ledge with his fists.

Blind! Unable to see! And Betty Murphy in danger of being burned to death! He well knew how insidiously fire crept upon those who slept. And he knew that if she were out, she would have let him know.

Blind! Helpless! And yet was he helpless? Didn't he have his strength, his two hands, two legs, a body, and a mind to guide the whole? And he knew from long acquaintance the lay of the land around the neighborhood. No, he couldn't stand around while Betty was in danger, blind though he was.

CHAPTER VII.

A FLAMING SACRIFICE.

GOING as fast as he dared, he made his way to the stairs, and went down, the back way. Outside he shouted once more, then, receiving no reply, stumbled across the yard until his outstretched, groping hands struck against the Simpson house.

Swiftly as he could he worked back along the house until he came to a doorway. Inside, smoke and heat struck him full in the face, choking him and burning him, but he crept around on the floor until the draft guided him to the stairs.

Up through flames that bit and lashed out at him, not knowing or caring what was ahead of him, guided only by his love of a golden-voiced girl he had never seen. Once she had told him that her room faced his almost directly, so his sense of location kept him on the right side of the house.

Calling continually, he stumbled along the corridor of the second floor. He came to a door, found the knob, and went in. Keeping to the wall he circled the room, came to the bed, and ran his hands hastily over it. It was empty so he felt his way out into the corridor again, and to the next door.

In the third room he found her, apparently unconscious, since she made no reply to his pleadings. The smoke was thick in the room, thicker there than elsewhere. Burke knew that the fumes had rendered her unconscious before she awakened.

Tenderly he gathered her up in his arms, and started for the door, bumping heavily into a dresser, almost falling flat over a chair. In the smoke and the flame, with the red glow striking luridly against his eyeballs, the soul of the little ladderman filled and overflowed with longing, and his prayer went up once more:

"Just lemme get her out safe, that's all! I guess I asked too much when I asked for my sight to see her, and I take it back! Just lemme get her out safe!"

Through the door he went and out into the hallway. There he stopped. It would never do to turn left and try to go down the stairs. Débris might have fallen that he would trip over—flames that always follow stair drafts might be sweeping up with such ferocity that passing would be impossible. His only hope would be to kick out the windows facing the front street, and call up some of the men.

Down the hall he went, clutching the limp form of Betty Murphy tightly in his arms, hearing above the crackle of the flames, the roar of the old trucks as they came thundering up!

A brief feeling of exultation penetrated his worry. His old mates would be pouring off the trucks and rushing to obey the orders of Chief Kennedy.

Far down the street the hydrant men would be working frantically, connecting. Ladders would be going up, and long lengths of hose laid out. Once more he was in the fight, doing his bit against the red menace.

His hand struck against a window. He felt it over until he had located the exact center, then without letting Betty go, he raised a foot and kicked, once, twice. In all the hubbub without, the smash of the breaking glass sounded insignificant and ludicrous to him, like the tinkling of chimes. Once more he kicked to clear away the sash, and then leaned out the window as far as he dared.

"Up here, chief!" he roared. "Second floor, front corridor! Make it fast!"

The old chief looked up, rubbed his eyes, and stared, open-mouthed.

"So help me, 'tis Burke with the Murphy girl!" he ejaculated. "How the hell——" Galvanized into action, he whirled about. "Two o' you men

go up there!" he barked. "Murphy, you and Elliot! Quick!"

Murphy was already on his way up the stairs, trembling for his sister's safety. Two bounds brought him to the end of the corridor.

"All right, Jerry, old man," he said, as he lifted his sister from Burke's arms. "I got her." He cast an anxious glance into Betty's still face, and added: "Grab my arms. We'll go out!"

Burke waved him away. "Go ahead!" he directed. "Get her out in the air! I'll slow things up! Get goin'!"

"But you ought to——"

"Take her out!" roared Burke. "The smoke got her and she needs the air right now! Hustle, you big ox!"

Murphy turned away and hurried down the stairs. Burke, now that his task was done, became aware that he was very tired and spent. Yet not so tired that he could not thrill to the stentorian orders of Chief Kennedy, and the tremendous hissing spat, as the water shot from the nozzles and slammed into the flames. It was the only life for the guy that had red blood in his veins—he knew that.

But there'd never be any more of it for him. This was his last appearance—unless that fourth warning that Pete talked so much about showed up. His life from now on would only be made up of memories, some bitter, some sweet, but all tinged with the glow of burning embers, the sweeping song of the flames, and the musical laughter of a golden-voiced girl. He sighed and his head went down.

CHAPTER VIII.

AND A MIRACLE SHALL BE PERFORMED.

ABOVE, the fire had been eating into the ceiling beams, steadily, voraciously, with insatiable appetite. Just in front of him a large square of plaster fell and broke into bits. Gray smoke swooped down about his head, and he coughed twice. Then came a rending sound like the tearing of thick paper, and Jerry Burke recognized the sound.

Yet there was nothing for him to do but stand. He didn't know how far along the ceiling the crack extended, and he couldn't see to get away from it. So he took a deep breath and stood still, head thrown back, hands clenched, quietly awaiting the death that seemed sure to come.

"The fourth warning!" Pete Murphy had said, and like the swift flitting of a swallow the phrase returned to Burke. Perhaps it was the fourth warning that was coming now, the fourth warning that never came.

Another crack sounded from above, and Jerry Burke's lips framed the word: "Betty!" Then with a crash the floor fell. Elliot was just arriving at the top of the stairs, and as he saw, his voice rang out, shrill with terror.

"Jump! Burke, jump!"

Burke did not move. A shower of sparks preceded the buckling timbers. The horrified Elliot saw Burke's arms go up to meet them, saw him struck and enveloped by burning boards, saw him sway and drop to the floor. Then Elliot leaped forward, and, regardless of burned hands or the danger that still threatened from above, he began digging frantically, the while yelling out the window for the rescue squad.

Presently they removed Jerry Burke from the débris, a silent, still, white-faced Burke, and carried him down the stairs. It looked as though the last alarm had come in for him. Faces were sober as they took him over to the ambulance.

"Heart's beating faintly," a doctor said. "He might pull through."

Old Chief Kennedy shook his head while the tears streamed down his weather-beaten face. But the chief's sentiments were the sentiments of all:

"He'll be better off if he's gone, the poor lad. Then he won't have to spend his life in darkness."

Betty Murphy revived in time to hear the news. She was dazed, uncomprehending, but when they told her, strength seemed to flow back into her veins, for she pushed away the women who were attending her and rose to her feet. She saw Burke at once, and hurried over to him, her face white. Edging through the group who surrounded him, she knelt by his side and took his tousled head into her arms.

"Jerry, dear," she whispered brokenly. "Please—please——"

It seemed an interminable time to her before the lids flickered. Then one eye opened slowly and then the other, blinked up dazedly at her, and closed wearily.

"Jerry!" she sobbed, holding him closer, heedless of the onlookers. "Jerry, dear, please——"

The lids fell back again, and those watching saw the white face of the little ladderman lighten with a great, unbelieving joy.

"Betty!" he cried fervently. "I can see you! Honest, I can see! Aw, I must be dreamin' or somethin'! This can't last! Somethin's wrong somewhere!"

In the radiant, glowing face of Betty Murphy, Burke found confirmation. Because he was very weak and not quite himself, he dared to reach up and touch one soft cheek, then to run his hand timidly over the silken hair.

"I knew you'd be like this," he sighed, and then the wonder of it came upon him. "Say! this is a miracle," he whispered. "Like the doc said—like the doc——"

His head drooped back against the shoulder of the girl. The doctor nodded to the attendants of the ambulance.

"Better get him to the hospital," he directed, low-voiced. "He'll be all right now with all that's happened to give him new strength and courage! But he's done up and needs rest and quiet."

Watching from a little distance was big Pete Murphy, his face a study in various emotions.

"The kid can see!" he muttered in awe-struck tones. "'Twas the fourth warnin', as sure as fate!"

Old Chief Kennedy gave him a glance.

"Maybe, lad," he said, "but I figure that that bromine and gas was just enough to make him blind for a short period o' time. Sort o' worked on some nerve centers or other, enough to make that doctor think he was goin' to be blind for good. Doctors can't be right all the time.

"When that floor crashed in on Burke, it did somethin' to one o' the nerve centers, and after that he could see. Anyway, there's lots o' funny things happen in a fire department, and I'm tickled pink that the lad can come back to the southern station."

He cast a contemplative look at Betty Murphy, who was still clinging to Burke. "Maybe you're right," he finished. "Maybe it was the fourth warnin', lad. But I'm inclined to think that it was brought about with the help of Heaven and a blue-eyed girl."

Free of Cost

A FARMER'S wife shipped a crate of eggs to a wholesale house in a city, but before doing so she wrote on one of them:

"I got two cents for this egg. What did you pay for it?"

She added her name and address.

A year later she received an answer. It was written on the highly embellished stationery of an actor.

"My dear madam," he wrote, "while playing the part of *Hamlet,* recently, I received your egg for nothing."

One On The Whiskers

by Seaburn Brown

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WITH THE GLASS JAW.

WHAT this world needs—now that nobody's asked me—is th' spirit of th' helpin' hand. An' I don't mean helpin' a hand by drawin' to piece out a bob-tailed flush. I'm referrin' to th' noble sentiment set forth in th' good old fourth-grade copy books: "One good worm deserves another turn."

Take me, f'rinstance—an' I've been taken plenty. I've never handed a bloke th' cold shoulder, 'less it was a shoulder of lamb, with ketchup. An' when Perfessor Greengrove called on me to—— But pardon my shirtsleeves; I'm introducin' th' perfessor out of turn. "Three-Round" McGhee comes first; which is quite a novelty, for him.

McGhee is a fighter. That is, he's got a license which gives him leave to do battle with Richard, Thomas an' Harry. So has my dog, for that matter. An' you can take it or heave it, as th' steward said to th' seasick passenger.

I seen th' perfessor for th' first time when McGhee fought "Hardy" McSlaughter in th' Kildare Club ring. He slept through three rounds, noddin' away in a frock coat an' stovepipe dip—th' perfessor, I mean; not McGhee.

McGhee, y'see, was th' three-round champ of th' world an' a ten to eight shot over th' man in th' moon. After th' third, he was customarily in want of a mattress, a doctor, farm relief legislation, an' a Red Cross drive. They'd procured his jaw at a bottlin' works; it was glass.

One solid smack to th' molar rack—an' McGhee was excused from further boisterousness on that particular occasion. He was pretty fast, so generally it took th' opposition a good three stanzas to nail his chin.

He could absorb a body beatin'. He was no slouch at submittin' punches for his playmate's consideration, either. But he just naturally couldn't weather a stiff rap on his hinge piece.

Well, as I said, th' perfessor, all tricked out like th' master of a lodge, attracted th' attention of all an' sundry.

In th' fourth period McGhee forgot to duck a right cross. Havin' forgot

that, he forgot everything else—for five minutes.

Th' referee counted over him—my idea of unnecessary labor; an' as he barked "Ten!" th' perfessor stood up, nodded wiselike, an' remarked: "Ah-h-h-h!"

I got McGhee a fight at th' same club two weeks later. They dropped him from the main eventer to th' special-event notch. I made no kick against th' demotion—a pug's got to win to stay in th' top-money; an' besides, th' special event was a mere four-round jog. I thought my animal could go th' distance.

He was matched to waltz with a sad-eyed lad known to th' ring addicts as "Kid" Krash, th' Duluth Demon.

Hist'ry repeated itself in a high falsetto. Three-Round McGhee had th' pride of Duluth lookin' awkward as a cub bear threadin' a needle for three sessions. In th' fourth my brute went down like a well digger in a prize contest.

Th' perfessor? Up he got, settled his topper on his ears, smiled dreamily, an' emitted th' same: "Ah-h-h-h!"

You couldn't beat that if it was a carpet!

I'm considerable of an optimist. I'd bet on "Bull Montana to win th' Miss America honors, if th' odds was right. But th' future of Three-Round McGhee looked to me like what the president would call a closed issue.

"McGhee," I told him, after th' Kid Krash fizzle, "yer horoscope insinuates that ye're due to adorn th' ranks of th' gentle order of piano movers."

"What?" he howled. "D'ye figure I'm a bum?"

"You been readin' my mail," I accused.

"I ain't done," he snarled. "I——"

"Oh, no," I said, fallin' back on that delicate sarcasm for which th' late Edgar Allen Poe an' me are noted. "You ain't done. Ye're overdone an' burned to a crisp. Speakin' with th' tender regard of a grandfather to a chorus girlie, I advise you to quit. Th' beatin's you consume will fricassee yer brains if you keep it up. I'd hate to see you wind up pluckin' daisies off th' floor of a padded cell."

"Gimme one more go," th' dumb-bell pleaded, droppin' his bluster an' stagin' a seventh-innin' rally. "I can come back, maybe."

"A good word—that 'maybe,'" I countered. "You ain't even sure of yerself. You ain't won a fight since a cook stove wasn't complete without a turkey wing duster. I'll get you a nice job leadin' blind guinea hens out——"

A timid knock on th' door of our humble chamber interrupted my fervid discourse. Hastily corkin' a pint bottle of graveyard gravy an' hidin' it, I opened th' door.

CHAPTER II.

A SCHOLARLY PROPOSITION.

THERE stood th' perfessor. He doffed his topper, exposin' a dome completely devoid of foliage except for a little scrub buffalo grass nestled around th' ears.

He bowed an' chirped: "Ah-h-h-h."

I burst into a profound silence. You know what I mean. This venerable beezark, with his glossy clothes an' dignified phiz, was out of place in our dump like a grand duke's cigarette-holder would be in a hockshop.

"Ah-h-h-h," he said again; an' then: "Have I the honor to address Mr. 'Catnip' Slipp, the eminent supervisor of pugilists?"

"You guessed that one first crack," I said politely. "Ask me another."

He handed me a card. He had so many initials he strung 'em out behind th' name.

I'll copy it down for you: Androcles Swint Greengrove, Ph.D., L.H.D., Ph.B.

"What am I supposed to do?" I inquired. "Commit this to memory?"

"Ha, ha," he quavered, just like that. "A merry jest at the result of my poor endeavors in scholarly pursuits." He sobered. "I am here to converse with Mr. Three-Round McGhee."

"Well," I cracked, sparrin' to feel his style, "seein' as I'm managin' McGhee in his sock an' blunder business, I'd like to know th' program ye're goin' to broadcast."

He gets solemn. "It is—ah—a matter that I must discuss personally with Mr. McGhee. I have a plan that will rebound to his advantage."

"It's some plan, if it'll help him," I snaggled. "If you can spill it with me in th' room, come on in. If it's too damned private, you can blow."

"You may join the conference," said th' prof, after a pause.

I throwed a pile of clothes off a chair an' shoved it toward th' perfessor. "Park yerself, Andy, old oyster," I said, cordial, an' turned to McGhee, who was gazin' redly at th' visitor outa one eye; th' other bein' closed by virtue of contusion.

"Here's a gent who says he's got a plan, which is somethin' we're outa stock," I informed my brute. "He wants to give us a load of it. All right, perfessor, strike up th' music."

"Ah-h-h-h, thanks. It has come to my mind that—ah—Mr. McGhee still retains possibilities of success," he started gropin'ly.

"There must be somethin' in this here idea of thoughts jazzin' from one skull to another," I cut in. "Th' same notion vacated my bonnet about four hours back. McGhee had a chance once; but, as th' poet discorded: 'Th' saddest words of tongue or pen, are: "My fighter is an also-ran.'"

"Courage—the absolute will to win," retorted th' perfessor, "overcomes difficulties that may appear insurmountable. Consider the story of Fulton."

"Fulton!" I boiled. "Say, chief, Dempsey disjointed him before you could say 'mulligatawny.' You talk of Fulton! Why, Fred Fulton——"

"No—no! I refer to Robert Fulton, of steamboat fame."

"I know all there is to know about 'em all, from Sullivan down," I rasped. "I've seen 'Gunboat' Smith, but I never heard of no 'Steamboat' Fulton. It's a cinch he was no champ. Who'd he ever lick, anyway?"

"We are at variance," trebled th' prof, "over personages of vastly separated fields of activity. I propose we confine our conversation to Mr. McGhee."

"O. K., Andy. What's your angle?"

"Beg pawdon?"

"Go ahead an' talk in yer own language," I directed. "Chew yer words well an' spit 'em one at a time an' end to end, an' I'll get you."

"I have the distinction of the chair of psychology at Yaleton University," he admitted.

"I believe you, perfessor," I hummed warmly, to put him at his ease; "an' I'll bet it's a real swell niftiest piece of furniture."

"At present," he went on, "my energies are in bondage to a problem of research. I have sought you because Mr. McGhee has it in his power to lend invaluable aid. Psychology, as you doubtless know, is the science of the mind——"

"Sorry," I horned in, "but you've sure treed th' wrong coon, Andy. Studyin' th' human mind with McGhee as Exhibit A for th' prosecution is my idea of buckin' a frame-up. You've left yer chair for nothin'. If you soaked McGhee's brain till it swelled it might reach th' proportions of a B-B shot—an' excuse th' exaggeration."

"Mr. McGhee is an ideal subject," he resumed, severelike. "The fact that he lives, moves, breathes, is proof of a brain——"

"Circumstantial evidence, prof—circumstantial. You'd never get a conviction."

"Dear me! Will you listen, please?" He got sore. "It is my aim to prove—with McGhee as my medium—that the human intellect, through power of will, is able to triumph over weakness of the flesh. More than this I cannot disclose in Mr. McGhee's presence. However, it is imperative that he be willing to conduct himself in future according to my orders."

I was going down for th' third time.

CHAPTER III.

BY WAY OF SCIENCE.

"TELL me more," I gasped. "McGhee's asleep—if ye're afraid he'll hear somethin' to give bad dreams." A snore like the rattle of a dyin' draft horse supported me.

"Very well," he surrendered. "My son, who peruses the sporting pages in the daily press and comments on their animalistic content, mentioned the peculiar case of Mr. McGhee. Instantly I was inspired.

"If it is true, I reasoned, that McGhee is a—ah—a fighter of superior talent, except for the single weakness of a chin that cannot withstand vigorous blows, then I can transform him into an unbeatable champion."

"What!"

"I can transform him into an unbeatable champion," he repeated firmly, "by the expedient of making him believe that his chin is the strongest in the world."

Any minute I was expectin' a keeper to bust in an' collar th' prof. He was a wreck in behind th' eyes, so it seemed to me.

"An' how?" I ventured.

"McGhee's elementary mentality will require a physical base on which to reconstruct his attitude of mind. That is to say, we shall have to convince him that a physical change has taken place in his lower maxillar."

"His which, prof?"

"His lower maxillar—lower jaw. We will pretend to perform an operation on his jaw, and persuade him that the operation has strengthened it greatly."

That sally altered th' situation like a home run in th' ninth frame of a tied tilt.

"Gosh, prof!" I crackled, "them colleges do shine th' old think tank, after all. An' I never gave you perfessors enough credit to buy a one-legged man corn plasters. I thought all you learned was Greek, which is surplus baggage to guys who don't eat in them kind of restaurants."

"Alas!" he groaned. "In part your supposition was correct. Educators abound who, in profound stupidity, scoff at my theory. It is to demonstrate to them—and particularly to one arrant, bombastic, cotton-brained donkey—the soundness of my thesis, that I am embarked on this—ah—adventure. That man is Aurelius Thistleboomer—a blemish on the faculty of the State University—a nincompoop—a—a——in fact, a——"

"A flat tire?" I suggested.

"Precisely!" he enthused. "Precisely!" But I must be going. Kindly escort Mr. McGhee to the Office of Doctor Dillard, in the Booth Building, tomorrow morning at ten."

"We'll be there," I promised, "like th' teeth in th' doc's bone saw."

Me an' my brute kept th' appointment bright an' early. McGhee didn't savvy what was afoot, which was natural as fins on a fish. We found th' perfessor an' th' doc in th' home stretch of an argument. They dragged me into Dillard's private office, leavin' McGhee to cool his heels in th' waitin' room.

"I've been telling my friend, the professor, that ethics of my profession for-

bid me to perpetrate this hoax—this fake operation," said th' medic.

"Who give this guy Ethics so much to say?" I carped.

"Nonsense, Edward," pleaded th' prof. "Ethics cannot be violated in this case. You know full well how I have sought for years proof to enthrone a theory for the betterment of the race.

"This pugilist is unable to joust successfully because he *thinks* he will be knocked out. Your reputation as a surgeon is potent. If you tell this man that his jaw has been injured—that you can restore——"

"But if the plan fails?" th' doc wet blanketed.

"It will not fail! If you will read the lucid exposition in the second volume of my work on——"

"Oh, damn the reading!" th' doc bellered. "I give up. Bring in your fool fighter and I'll force him to think he can use a telephone pole for a penholder."

Professor Greengrove opened th' door.

"Doctor Dillard desires your attendance, Mr. McGhee."

My brute slouched in like an old dog about to try a new trick. He incorporated himself with a chair.

Th' doc gave him th' dog eye. Even I shivered.

"Ever have hallucinations?" demanded Doctor Dillard.

"Nope," McGhee denied. "Y'see, I was vaccinated when they drafted me in th' war."

Th' doc unlocked a glass case an' brought out a squad of cutlery—saws an' long, curved knives—which would make a butcher's carvin' equipment look like a set of nail files. He got into a surgical gown, pried open McGhee's mouth, an' tapped his teeth with a small hammer.

"Seems to be an unnatural click when the jaw swings free," he said, serious. "I'll employ the X ray."

Believe me, McGhee was a Rotarian in th' Lions' den durin' all this smoke-up. Finally th' doc's face brightened.

"I have it!" he caroled. "A bit of loose cartilege in the left hinge joint is resting on a nerve in direct connection with that brain area which controls consciousness. I can remove the pressure, Mr. McGhee, and you'll be better than ever. The operation is simple."

"Huh?" McGhee said huskily.

"I can fix your jaw so you can't be knocked out."

"A veritable miracle," murmured th' perfessor.

CHAPTER IV.

HOWLING PUBLICITY.

A WHOLE bucket of mackerels!" whooped McGhee. "If ye c'n take th' glass outa me toothcase! Fly to it, doc!"

Well, th' doc unlimbered a can of ether, an' McGhee choked his way into a most familiar state—artificially produced senselessness.

Th' doc made a scratch over th' left jaw hinge—an inch long an' barely skin deep—an' doused it with iodine an' covered it with courtplaster.

"Maybe," he said, regretfullike, "I should lift his tonsils to salve my conscience."

"Never mind," th' perfessor bleated quick. "The plaster on his face and the ether sickness will be sufficient for the experiment."

While my brute gathered his wits—a snap job—I dragged th' prof to one side.

"Andy," I said in a lodge-grip tone, "I got a contract for th' exclusive benefits, if any, from Three-Round McGhee's leather slingin'. It ain't no more'n right we should split th' percentage from now on. I'm goin' to tear up my contract an' write a new one, now, makin' us equal partners. McGhee'll sign it when he comes to.

He'll sign anything but a check—he done a stretch for that once."

He shook his lofty dome. "I appreciate your generous gesture. However, I am not seeking financial gain. I prefer to remain in the background. Let the profits be yours; the delight of scientific research be mine."

"But if you ain't got anything to show ye're in on this deal," I argued, "th' others profs'll laugh at yer claims when McGhee is champ."

"By Jove! A shrewd surmise," he tumbled. "Prepare the document for my signature."

Brethren, a weather forecaster don't think ahead further'n old man Slipp's boy Catnip does. I could pass an examination on my oats in a school for mules. A fighter don't reach th' top rung on just what's in his fists—th' color has to be there to thrill th' railbirds an' nab space in th' newspapers.

McGhee had as much color as a coal yard—alone. But with th' prof as th' life of th' party, my brute would sparkle like a midnight display of fireworks.

That evenin' I scampered among th' sportin' editors. They were skeptical of my story till I backed it with th' prof's name on th' dotted line. An' then there was four-horse teams pullin' them typewriter carriages! I told 'em everything except th' fake operation.

Th' leadin' mornin' sheet sprung an eight-column banner line, so:

YALETON SCIENTIST TO MANAGE THREE-ROUND McGHEE.

An' sub-heads:

Professor Greengrove Buys Interest of Catnip Slipp.

Mystery Shrouds Motive; Psychologist Expects McGhee to Win Welter Crown, Slipp Asserts.

Th' effect of this publicity on th' prof was so rough that for several days enterprisin' undertakers wore his telephone number pasted in their kellys. You know what I mean. He knocked me for a row of Persian proverbs when I explained th' whys an' what fors. I was dazzled.

"I didn't mean no harm," I assured him. "You oughta thank me. McGhee'll move ahead fast—every promoter's clamorin' for him. An' yer theory'll be a household gem when you write this up in a book."

"Tut! tut!" he chided.

"That's what some loud speakers chimed when th' explorers busted into that Egyptian grave," I fired back. "Yet look what they found: enough gold an' diamonds to plate a fat man's vest a foot deep, along with Tut."

"Your reasoning," he hooted, "is elementary."

That's all th' farther I got in school," I rebounded. "But I stayed till I was hep to everything layin' loose—put in two years in each class."

We dispute back an' forth—not to speak of hither an' thither—an' in th' end th' prof gets a glimmer of light an' is ready to change th' subject, an' I'm ready to shortchange it. For once he got th' lay of th' land, th' prof took th' bull by th' ring in his nose an' played th' game.

Th' space th' sportin' eds handed him could contain th' names of all th' generals in Mexico in fourteen-point type leaded.

Now, dearly beloved, th' curtain falls. This denotes th' flight of time; six months, in round numbers. It rises—an' here we are.

McGhee has won twelve straight fights—at least, he's won twelve fights in succession. Guess what I mean.

Me—I'm pointed out—which ain't needful, as my overhauled wardrobe is visible to th' naked eye at four miles—as th' discoverer of Three-Round McGhee. This may or may not be good

judgment, to quote th' gambler when he shot th' works on a low flush.

An' th' perfessor—sweet essence of resin! He's in th' public eye like a cataract, an' is th' center of more disputes than th' judge at a baby show. He's photographed an' interviewed; a spook chaser even attempts to snapshot his dreams. He draws a mob whenever he ventures onto a sidewalk. Preachers, perfessors an' poultrymen write letters to th' papers, callin' him a hero or a humbug, dependin' on whether they see clear or are behind a post.

CHAPTER V.

SCIENCE CHALLENGES SCIENCE.

PROFESSOR GREENGROVE kept his mouth shut, beyond declarin' that he'd reveal his hole card in his own good time.

In order that nobody will have to stay after class an' ask questions, I'll announce that up to this point—marked "X"—I've been guardin' my brute's hocus-pocused chew shelf from undue stress. These here, now, dozen scraps he's won have included what th' prof would call "gladiatorial conflicts" with pretty good cuffers—but not a single start against a *heavy socker*. Consequently McGhee's got all th' confidence in his ability to get along of a moth in a blanket mill.

The prof ain't wise to my side-steppin' th' heavy artillery welterweights. McGhee's too dumb to be wise to anything. I ain't sure, myself, that his jaw ain't bolstered to genuine reënforced concrete. But why take risks? I'm mindful of that smart crack which was sprung by Socrates or "Battlin' " Nelson or somebody: "One little touch of leather makes th' whole world spin rapidly."

Howsomever all this may be, a night falls without sprainin' any tendons an' finds th' three of us loungin' in a sweet suite—three rooms an' bath; th' prof will throw away money on a bath—in the' frontier town of Indianapolis.

McGhee has got his breath back after knockin' Jackie Jewett, third or fourth rankin' hundred-and-forty-five-pounder, limper than a sick eel.

Th' prof rang for a bell hop. "Let us see," he taxed him, "what the gentlemen of the press have written on our victory."

"Reduced to simple fractions," I offered help, "th' prof means for you to shag us a newspaper."

Professor Greengrove took th' sport sheet, yawned languid, got th' range with his glasses, an—fainted! Passed out like a dancin' mother!

To this day I consider he took th' news mildlike; for th' fight was barely recorded: th' story of th' hour was a challenge issued by Professor Aurelius Thistleboomer, State University scientist, to Professor Greengrove for a tangle betwixt McGhee an' "Iron Man" Murphy.

Iron Man Murphy, dear friends an' neighbors, was a horseshoe-bendin', glass-eatin', double-loaded bunch of lilies in th' hand. Th' world champ had dodged him! so had McGhee. I don't know where Murphy was born, but I've heard that in his country th' meadowlarks sing bass. He hit an elephant once; for days th' crittur was so weak it had to lean against a wall when it trumpeted.

While I was still addled as a guy seekin' a corner in a roundhouse, th' prof came to th' surface an' read th' rest of th' yarn. It was a pip. Thistleboomer had figured out Greengrove's idea an' set himself to make a bum outa my prof by gettin' McGhee ruined. He called Professor Greengrove all th' high-powered names there is for "sap," an' defied him to submit his subject to th' test.

"We're torpedoed, prof," I groaned.

"Eureka!" he hollered. "Eureka!"

I brightened. "Good idea!" I ap-

plauded. "That's a California burg, ain't it? We'll board a rattler for there to-night—nobody'll find us."

He waxed frantic.

"Run away, do you suggest?" he screeched. "Heaven forbid! The glorious day has arrived—the day I have longed for! McGhee shall meet this tincture of iron person and vanquish him."

"Are you daffy?" I gargled. "This Murphy is so tough he buys rat poison for tooth paste. No tellin' what'll happen if he lands on McGhee's jaw—he may leave th' ring wearin' it on top his head like a hat."

"Stuff and nonsense, Mr. Slipp."

"McGhee," I wailed, talk sense to Andy. He's smoothin' th' sheets of a hospital cot for you."

McGhee had gone looney, too. 'Catnip," he disagreed, "ye're all wet. I'll beat Murphy like a rug. Th' prof knows—an' what he lisps goes with me."

"Hallelujah!" bawled Andy. "I will summon a reporter and accept the challenge."

"Wait," I squawked feebly. "Wait till——"

But he's got th' receiver off th' hook.

Well, folks, th' ballyhoo th' papers accorded th' Murphy-McGhee clash would make you think Lon Chaney was billed for a face-contortin' contest with th' wild man of Borneo. "Rex" Flickard th' astute promoter, made hay while th' goose hung high, as th' sayin' goes. He dilly-dallied until th' public's fever rose nine inches higher than th' Woolworth tower.

It was a stark mad, shriekin' mob that flooded th' Garden arena th' night th' boys collided—sardines packed in banana oil, so to speak.

Nobody within' telescope distance of th' ring was dizzier than I was, either; since th' bout was signed for I'd been up in th' air more hours than Lindbergh, an' I don't mean if, as an' when.

Th' prof, contrary-wise, was cool as yer apartment when th' janitor don't fancy th' way you part yer hair.

We entered th' corral first. Th' ovation granted th' prof would make a Louisiana thunderstorm sound noisy as a minute in a graveyard at midnight. Aurelius Thistleboomer an' his missin' link got th' same.

CHAPTER VI.

LOADED WITH DYNAMITE.

I'D never seen Iron Man Murphy at such close range as when he tramped across th' canvas to wag McGhee's paw. I hope I never see him so near again. He'd send chills up th' back of a snow man. He was built on th' order of a war tank an' looked about as harmless. I turned so yellow I was afraid it'd show through my shirt.

Th' perfessor beamed at him pityingly. Digest that!

McGhee wasn't no response to a portrait painter's prayer himself. He was carryin', however, the sympathy of my fambly, unto th' third an' fourth generations, when th' gong clanged an' they shuffled out to deal th' pasteboards of punch.

Overlookin' th' courtesy of cuttin' for th' deal, Murphy dealt three aces—two lefts an' a right for th' head. McGhee took 'em on his elbows an' demonstrated what th' best-dressed boxers will wear—a pair of stiff cuffs; both connectin' with th' Iron Man's jaws.

They clinched. Comin' out of it, Murphy feinted for th' head an' sunk his right in McGhee's midriff. McGhee backed away an' stepped in quick, lettin' fly a straight left. It was a wow of an effort.

Murphy slipped th' punch an' hooked his own left to th' body. McGhee dropped his guard with a grunt.

Wham!

Like a flash th' Iron Man's dynamite right exploded against McGhee's conk. Th' ropes stopped him from scramblin' th' nearest ringsiders. Th' bell rang.

"Oh, boy," I jubilated, huggin' th' prof. "Th' gong saved him!"

"He required no saving," he retorted. "He is impervious to shock. Kindly look at him."

I looked—an' got th' surprise of my blameless life; for McGhee came skippin' to his corner with a wide grin, and much pep!

Then it hit me all of a sudden, as th' quarryman mumbled after he went back to examine a slow fuse. McGhee's ear was red; th' punch was too high to press th' button. Had it been two inches lower! But you can't tell th' perfessor nothin'.

'Nine rounds to go," I impressed on my brute. "Keep yer chin behind yer shoulder an' yer mind on pleasant things."

"He can't hurt me," McGhee sneered. "I can take all he's got home in a basket."

"Includin' yerself, you nut!" I snarled.

Murphy boxed cautiouslike through th' second installment. I doped that he was tryin' to measure his man for a chin chop that wouldn't miss—but th' upshot of his new style was a ray of hope. Th' way he played for th' body constantly was a giveaway that th' Iron Man had made th' same mistake as th' prof. He thought he had nailed my brute square th' first time an' was beginnin' to lose heart on winnin' via th' jaw route.

Durin' th' intermission after th' second round, Professor Thistleboomer—a little gink whose eyes resembled hazelnuts in a patch of beard moss—put his fighter on th' grease. Murphy shook his head, stubborn.

Yet in th' third period th' Iron Man laced a few into McGhee's teeth. But they were half-hearted efforts. Murphy showed enthusiasm only when he punched for th 'bread basket. It was a torrid session, about even-Steven, a first-class riot.

McGhee romped to his seat fairly steady, although he was pink as a June dawn around th' stomach. Th' Iron Man's right eye was cloudy.

"How ya feel?" I said to McGhee.

"Like a champion," he growled. "Couple more rounds an' I'll crate this cripple for shipment."

"Watch his right hand," I begged, "or ye'll be combin' a rainbow outa yer eyebrows."

McGhee charged out like a wild buffalo, batterin' Murphy to th' hemp. Th' Iron Man rallied. They slugged toe-to-toe, eatin' leather. Then McGhee's foot slipped an' he stumbled just as Murphy invested his brawn in a right-hand haymaker.

McGhee's dip toward th' floor caused th' Iron Man's wallop to miss. McGhee regained his balance first an' cashed in with a beaut of an uppercut to the whiskers.

Murphy landed on his shoulder blades, bounced to his knees, an' was up at the count of "nine"—in a condition like some playboys prefer their blondes—dreamy.

In ripped McGhee, throwin' punches. Murphy, like a carpenter stakin' his awl on one hand, struck his right mitt behind him, as if reachin' for somethin', an' brought it around.

Th' leather formed a union with McGhee's countenance abaft his left canine molar. Th' molar—with a few of its pals—went one way; McGhee another. I was concludin' that th' dog tooth was as likely to get up an' fight as McGhee was, when th' prof hissed:

"The test! The test!"

Well, sir—you don't have to believe this; I wouldn't, myself, if you was spielin' it to me—th' brute got up! He wasn't able to stand. He was barely clear of th' canvas when he collapsed

like a tent with a fracture of th' center pole.

He escaped disqualification for goin' down without bein' hit because th' Iron Man overanxious, smacked him on th' shoulder as he sank.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE ON THE WHISKERS.

TH' extra nine count put a cup of starch into my brute's pins. He achieved uprightness once more, an' managed to fall into a clinch an' hang on. Th' referee couldn't have pried him loose with a hot poker. Murphy might have shook him loose an' kayoed him if he hadn't been kinda woozy from his own knockdown.

Th' handwritin' was plain on th' barroom floor when we dished th' stimulants to McGhee at th' close of th' session. He was all settled, like th' Spanish war.

"He'll go into th' fifth wobbly," I warned th' prof.

"Ha, ha," he trilled merrily. "The test is succeeding."

"I wish," I yelped, bitter, "I had yer education in place of my brains."

McGhee moaned.

'How ya feel now, champ?" I stabbed.

"I ain't been in swimmin', mamma," he whimpered. "Feel me hair; it's dry."

Th' timekeeper reaches for th' bell cord.

"Run on out an' play with th' little boy in th' yard," I told McGhee. "That little shaver over there with th' funny mittens—an' knock his damn head off now!"

McGhee slumped forward with th' firmness of a jellyfish raised on junket.

Iron Man Murphy set himself flat-footed an' performed a stirrin' variation of th' one-two punch—a left hook to th' body an' right to th' jaw.

Th' left landed.

Th' right didn't—it missed entirely.

Tell you why, before I forget: Mr. McGhee didn't—an' couldn't—wait for th' second slap. Th' body blow laid him like an' egg. He was supine an' prone before th' follow-up fist arrived at where he *was*.

Th' referee fed me an eye. "Take 'im away," he commanded. "There's no free garbage service here."

"Didn't I tell you?" I harpooned th' prof. "You wouldn't listen to me—now we've laughed off th' shot at th' title an' yer theory's a blank cartridge, all because you insisted on meetin' Murphy."

He stared at McGhee an' rubbed his chin—his own chin.

"Let's blow," I urged, "before Thistleboomer buttonholes us with sour remarks."

I was too late. Thistleboomer had negotiated th' ring and was upon us.

"Ha!" he squealed. "Ha!" He made a few hot gestures at Professor Greengrove.

"Go roll yer hoop, feller!" I said, riled. "I'm apt to knock you clean back to yer sophomore year."

Professor Greengrove tilted his chin till his Adam's apple stood out like a porch light. He glared at us both, an' cleared his throat.

"Your twaddle is childish," he pronounced. "My theory is indisputably established."

"You are non compos mentis," shrills Thistleboomer.

"I wouldn't say that," I protested. "But I do think he's crazy."

Professor Greengrove sniffed. "I observed," he said, "that the blow that rendered Mr. McGhee hors de combat struck him in the solar plexus and temporarily paralyzed a section of his nervous apparatus controlling his leg muscles. He was not smitten on the jaw. My point is prov——"

"Possibly," blatted Thistleboomer, "possibly your own jaw is similarly fortified with resolution?"

"Possibly," said Professor Greengrove, "it is."

"We will see," says th' little perfessor, an' he unwound an amateur barndoor swing for th' Greengrove face. It broke my glasses.

"Fellow!" bellered Professor Greengrove. "Dolt! I will annihilate your gross sensibilities!"

He delivered a left haymaker that would have floored Professor Thistleboomer if my snoot hadn't been standin' innocently in th' way.

I departed as Thistleboomer parried a barrage of Latin adjectives an' countered with a punishin' snatch of Sanscrit.

I gathered from th' public prints of th' ensuin' morning that th' warrin' perfessors had slugged to a draw in their ringside wrangle, an' that an official decision will be given when th' books which they threaten to write are off th' presses.

Maybe they'll give me th' rap, despite my exertions for th' best of all involved, includin' Si Kology.

I tried hard, though.

Anyway, this is my story—an' I'm stuck on it.

THE SILENT MEN

By Lester Raymond Cash

THEY come from the forests, the mountains the plains,
The sea—all the wide-open spaces;
Their faces are scarred from the winds, and the rains
Have left their indelible traces;
And scorching hot suns that have blistered and burned
Have marked them as men who are branded
With Nature's own brand in full proof they have spurned
What Civilization demanded.

They're brimming with Life, all these sturdy and strong;
Their bodies are supple, yet oaken.
Their eyes are a-shine from a soul filled with song—
Yet ever their deeds are unspoken.
Their lives are replete with adventures that thrill,
Their daily existence is glory—
But ask them to speak of themselves if you will,
You'll never give ear to their story.

For these are the men of the Silence, the men
Who live close to Earth as created;
To whom, through no agents of tongue or of pen,
The Romance of Life is related;
And words are but futile to men such as these,
But frail things of little emotion,
For what use are words in communing with trees
Or singing the song of the ocean?

Hands Up!

By

Albert M. Treynor

(A SERIAL—PART V.)

AN American tractor salesman, Curzon, was involved in unusual adventures one night in Mexico. He was married to an unknown veiled girl. Then, mistaken for the bandit Ruy da Luz, he was sentenced to be shot.

Jerked from death at the hands of the firing squad the following morning by another American, Curzon made an escape. Later he was forced to play bandit himself, and he held up a stage coach. In doing this he and Toomey, the other American, were forced to carry off the two girls, who were in the coach, as protection against the rurales.

One of the girls, but which one he did not know, was Curzon's wife.

That night they found the home of one of the girls in the hands of real bandits. Curzon bluffed and, in order to make things safer for the two girls, notified the bandit leader, Barboza, that the girl whose father's home he had captured is his wife. The leader announced a feast in celebration of the event.

Curzon, when Barboza became too obnoxious during the feast, started trouble. During the excitement and fighting in the semi-dark he escaped with the girls, later to be trapped in a barn. The bandits fired the barn roof just as Curzon has started a large caterpillar tractor. He drove the heavy machine through the rear of the barn and with it battered through the outer palisade.

Near by they joined Toomey who, during the feast, had silenced several bandit guards and had secured horses. Upon these animals the four raced with all speed to the kindly protection of the hills, with the bandits in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TEST THAT FAILED.

THE Amor hacienda occupied the last stretch of the open grass country. Farther on the grazing lands gave way to ancient pine forests. The ground piled up abruptly in a series of terraces and knife-edged ridges, jutting higher and higher toward the backbone of the wild and trackless Sierra del Chuhuichupa, which, in the hybrid dialect of the neighborhood, means the Mountains of the Dead.

A tremendous wilderness was on the other side, timbered heights, snow peaks and mile-deep canyons. It was a savage,

unpeopled region, holding lonesomeness and danger, but offering also a haven of safety for the hunted, lawless people who ventured from time to time into the bewildering barrancas.

The first of the terraced ridges loomed above the four fugitives. There was cover at their left, but in the other direction the hog-back edge stood gaunt and barren above them. Toomey, the strategist, took the lead of the party. Instead of dodging for the nearest concealment, he struck off to the right and rode up the slope in full sight of the pursuing bandits.

They gained the crest of the hill several hundred yards ahead of Barboza's yelling skirmishers. For a second or two their silhouettes showed on the luminous sky, and then the horses dipped over the hilltop and pitched down the steep declivity.

Before them and on either side stretched the shade of the deep forest. They were traveling northwest when the bandits had the last glimpse of them. But the moment the hill slid behind them Toomey swept his arm around in a sharp signal, and swerved hard to the left. The ground underfoot, luckily, was too firm to hold tracks that could be followed at night. The clatter along the slope as they ranged southward was like the pounding of hoofs on a pavement. But Barboza's men were still too far away to hear, and when the advance riders finally shoved over the ridge the four fugitives had dodged out of sight in the flanking strip of woods.

As they passed among the shadows of the big, friendly trees, Toomey dropped back to ride with Curzon. Through an aisle between the shaggy trunks of the pines they could see without being seen. They saw mounted shapes bob over the ridge—two—a dozen—fifty: horsemen strung out in irregular lines, walloping their bronchos, riding furiously on the blind trail.

Neither Desafio nor Barboza could have been in the party. A leader who made the least pretense of thinking would have scattered his forces through the timber. These must be the riffraff of the pack, heedless, hot-headed men, running a trail of their own imagining.

They had seen their quarry vanish in a northwest direction, and that was the direction they went, everybody chasing after the fastest horse and trying to hold the breakneck pace. For two or three minutes a straggling procession raced across the open ground, to be swallowed by the woods. The tail enders plunged after their comrades, and the fugitives heard nothing further that night of Barboza's ruffians.

There was a singular absence of undergrowth under the trees, which stood up straight from the ground like the majestic columns of a cathedral. In a silence relieved only by the creak of leather and the dry crunching of pine needles, the fugitives made their way westward through filtered patches of moonlight. Toomey still rode stirrup to stirrup with his wounded companion, ready to offer a supporting hand in case of further mishaps.

"You feelin' any better?" he asked presently.

Curzon nodded. His wound was too slight to bother him. The nature of the ground forced them to move at a leisurely pace, and as long as his horse refrained from antics it was easy enough to stick on.

"What happened back there?" asked Toomey.

"The fiesta went off splendidly for a while. But unfortunately we got into an argument."

"Argument about what?"

"Turkeys, I think it was, or something like that. Anyhow we broke up in a row and had to run for it." Curzon glanced at the muleteer. "How'd you get outside with the horses?"

"You know them three bottles o' hooch you give me to give to the two

guards on the gate? Well, what more d'you want to know?"

"They killed 'em?"

"Who, the guards?"

"No, the bottles."

"Play it either way, and you win," said Toomey. "Did you ever see a Mexican jumping-bean? Yeh? Well, that's the kind o' beans them two guys'll think they've got on their necks if they ever come to any more."

To Curzon the rest of that night was disjointed and meaningless as phantasms of a dream. They pushed into a country tilted askew, winding through hushed and ghostly forests, fording brooks that boiled white among rocks. They went creeping up long ravines and across dizzy rims and slopes, climbing on neighborly terms with the moon and clustering stars in quiet and lifeless regions that mounted higher and higher before them. For hours they labored on the steeps, one mile up for two miles forward. Daylight discovered them on a bare, wind-blown promontory, overlooking the vast sweep of the Mountains of the Dead.

A stupendous landscape reached off to the sky, an ocean of mountains. The effect was of waves lashed to fury, and then arrested by some miracle and forced to remain always as they were caught at the height of a hurricane. And as a final stormy touch a long, metallic ridge in the distance captured the rays of the morning sun to flash across the sky like a jagged bolt of lightning.

Curzon, however, at that moment, was not interested in scenery. He had been many hours without sleep, and mind and nerves and body were worn to the verge of atrophy. When they made their decision to halt he slipped from the saddle, crawled off behind a sheltered rock, covered his face with Da Luz's hat, and immediately drifted off into heavy slumber.

It was not the sound of the voices that aroused him at last from the drugged stupor of exhaustion. No mere noise could have broken his rest until he had slept off his fatigue and was ready to awaken of his own accord. But when he finally struggled back to consciousness he was dimly aware of voices talking near him. One of the speakers was prattling gayly, and he identified Herminia, in a light-hearted mood.

"It was funny, I could have laughed," the girl was saying. "*Sqush!* In Barboza's face! Señor da Luz whirled it so by one of its legs, and how untidy Barboza's w'iskers looked after that!"

"Hit him with the turkey?" The other speaker was Sam Toomey.

"Such a big turkey. I never saw such a big one before."

"Humph!" said the muleteer in his lazy drawl. "Your friend Da Luz must be a nice guy on a party. Lovely table manners, nothing unpolite or vulgar. What happened then?"

Before the girl could reply Curzon propped open one eye, yawned prodigiously, and sat up. "What time you got?" he asked.

Toomey and Herminia and Jay Coulter were seated in a circle about a small cooking fire which they had built in the lee of a tall, chimneylike rock of weathered porphory. The pleasantest sizzling sounds came from the fire and the breeze carried a savor of broiling meat. Saddles and bridles and firearms were piled around the bivouac, and near by lay the partly butchered carcass of a mule deer. Toomey must have been out stalking while his comrade was sleeping the sun around.

When he had flopped down that morning in the shadow of the rocks Curzon had not bothered even to kick off his shoes. But his shoes were missing now, and also his shirt and silver jacket. Instead, he found himself in a scratchy, warm blanket. Somebody had tried to make him comfortable, and gave him a bed covering when the chilly wind blew up from the west.

He blinked the sleep out of his eyes, and discovered that Jay Coulter had his shirt in her lap. The garment had been laundered and dried, and the girl at that moment was sewing up the knife-rent under the arm. She had a raveling of silk for thread and in lieu of a needle she used a pin, with which she laboriously poked the stitches through the fabric. When Curzon surprised her at the task she had almost finished. She tied a knot, snapped the thread and tossed him the shirt.

"It's seven minutes of seven," she told him, and her manner was very casual as she looked at her wrist watch. "In the evening," she added.

He caught the shirt on the fly. "And I've been asleep all day, while you've been washing and mending? You're a dandy!"

Jay picked up a stick to punch the fire, and her face flushed as she turned from him. She looked as if she were ashamed at being caught in a kindly act.

"Oh, the shirt," she said, as though she only just remembered. "I don't like to look at messy clothes, and I'm afraid we'll be together for a while longer, anyhow. So that was why."

"How are you, aside from your clothes?" inquired Toomey.

Curzon stood up, wrapped in his blanket. His legs felt as stiff as a couple of boards that had been nailed to him, and every muscle and fiber of his body was a separate ache. That was from riding, of course. In time he'd limber up, no doubt. He made a wry face as he stretched himself.

"If you'll go up the main hallway and turn down the first corridor to your left you'll find the shower bath ready for you, sir," said Toomey.

At the right of the camp fire opened a narrow, rock defile from which a stream of sparkling water poured forth to tumble over the side of the mountain shelf. Curzon picked up his shoes and jacket and walked up through the cut. In a short distance he was halted by a sheer wall, over which the brook cascaded in a two-hundred-foot fall.

The water broke up into spray in its tumultous descent to splatter the rocks with a fine, icy rain. Curzon stripped and stood under the shower, and when he stepped out again a resurgence of life tingled under his skin.

He refastened Toomey's bandage, dressed, and sauntered back to camp, his blond hair plastered back wetly from his forehead, his eyes alert and bright.

The muleteer had vanished during his absence, but the two girls were waiting.

"Here's some venison," said Jay, offering him a slab of crisp meat, which she had been toasting over the coals on a forked stick. "It's a little tough. Too fresh."

"Where's Toomey?" he inquired.

"The horses are pastured in a little park on the other slope. He went down to see if they're still all right."

As Curzon laid his steak on a flat stone and started to slice off a piece with his belt knife, he was aware that Herminia was watching him with a pert and piquant curiosity.

"I did not notice before, Señor Ruy," said the little Mexican suddenly, "that your eyes were so blue, like the summer sky. It is funny,—such a wicked man to have such unwicked eyes!"

"You ought to be ashamed, Herminia!" Curzon frowned disapprovingly. "Flirting! Flirting with your own husband! Didn't they teach you how to behave when you were at your school?"

"You are not my husband." She dimpled for an instant, and then sighed and shook her head. "It is sad that it is not so. We should have been such a fine-looking couple."

"Herminia, you must not fib. I was not quite sure yesterday, but now I know. Something happened last night that gave you away. You are the one." He faced her sternly. "And now I want

the truth. Why did you do such a thing?"

"Oh, it's terrible for you not to believe me. I keep telling you, and I don't know what more I can say, unless——" She stopped and flashed him a look of quick audacity. "You would know the lady who is your wife, if you were to kiss her?"

He nodded confidently.

"And if the one you kissed were not your wife, you could tell that, too?"

"Undoubtedly," he declared.

Herminia was half reclining by the fire, leaning on one elbow. Now she sat up and smiled daringly at him. She pouted a pair of red and provocative lips. "I am waiting," she said.

Curzon took off his hat, tossed it aside, and moved forward on one knee. Suddenly his arms went about her yielding figure, he drew her to him.

For an instant Herminia clung to him, and then, with a faint, gasping sigh, she released herself and moved away. She regarded him impishly, from under drooping lashes. "Well?"

His smile was whimsical as he answered with a slow shake of his head. "I'm afraid," he said, "that I must reserve decision."

"Oh, but that isn't fair. I——" Herminia caught herself with a rueful grimace and her squirrellike glance darted from Curzon to Jay Coulter. "I see what you mean. You are not satisfied with just one—what do you call it—experiment? You wish to try another. I am frightfully jealous, but w'at can I do?" Her penciled brows grew severe. "Go ahead then. Am I stoppin' you?"

Curzon shifted a quizzical glance toward Jay Coulter. The Northern girl was seated on the opposite side of the fire, an indolent shoulder leaning against the chimney of rock. Her frivolous dress of green silk and orange lace was an absurd costume for mountain climbing, but she had nothing else to wear.

A night on the rough trails had left her a bit bedraggled looking. But a dauntless smile hovered about her mobile lips, and the golden brightness of her eyes remained undimmed.

"Herminia is right." Curzon grinned. "It wouldn't be fair not to finish the experiment."

Jay looked at them with amused tolerance, like a grown-up who permits herself to be drawn into the foolish play of children. "To settle the argument, whatever it's about," she consented lightly, "all right."

She lifted herself from the rock with a negligent sway of her shoulders and stood acquiescent, her hands resting lightly on her hips.

Curzon stepped across the fire to bend above her. They faced one another in a jesting humor. Jay's hands reached up toward his shoulders, and their glances met. Curiously the girl's laughter died away.

The mockery that had enlivened her eyes suddenly vanished, and instead the widened pupils held a startled, sobered expression, a question and a dawning of strange disquiet. It was as though an unsettling thought had buzzed into her head to alarm and bewilder her.

The hand that had touched his shoulder dropped stiffly between them. "I——" she started to say, and broke off haltingly, her breathing checked, a dark, self-conscious color suffusing her temples. She turned her head away and denied him her eyes.

"I'd—rather not—myself," he heard himself saying, but he spoke so confidentially, to prevent Herminia from overhearing him, that Jay probably had no notion what it was about. "Not in fun. If we——" He stopped, floundering for words.

Herminia, looking on, expert and critical, chose this juncture to interrupt. "Well!" she remarked briskly. "I want to see. Are you goin' to take all day?"

Neither of the others answered. Then, just as it was growing embar-

rassing not to answer, a rifle shot crashed out on the hill slope somewhere below them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BARRANCAS.

THE sound was ominous in its unexpectedness, yet Curzon whirled almost with a sense of relief. At least it spared them from Herminia's inquisitiveness. Jay did not move, her chin thrown up as she tried to look over the rim of the hill.

"The horses are down there," she said, "and Toomey."

Curzon pulled a carbine from one of the saddle sheaths and started forward. In a moment he crossed the bulge of ground, and looked down upon a grassy glade on the other side. Toomey was climbing the slope, leading four haltered horses. He waved his arm at sight of the man above him.

"Just one o' them cave Indians," he said as he came up within talking distance. "He was crawlin' over the hill, tryin' to run off the animals. I dusted him a trifle with a .30-30, an' he got off his mark with the shot. If you ever meet a Tarahumara foot-racer in a purple bandanna and no pants, that'll be him."

"A purple bandanna?" echoed Curzon. "That must be the runner who brought Barboza a message last night from Captain Corcuera."

Toomey wrinkled his forehead and squinted across the hollow. "You don't say? That wouldn't be why, then."

"Why what?"

"Why he's snoopin' around here. They must 'a' sent him to track us. Barboza or Corcuera sent him. Well, that means no more restin' for us. Them Tarahumara foot-racers are the fastest two-legged runners in the world. This one'll take back the news in nothin' flat." Toomey puckered up his freckled lips and whistled philosophically.

"We gotta saddle up an' move on," he remarked. "So it goes. Here to-day and gone to-morrow. Bandits and police behind us, and the country of the dead beyond. Heigh-ho! If you have enough fun in the first few years, count the last few years as velvet."

The Mountains of the Dead is a vast graveyard. This savage, inaccessible nest of mountains lies deep in the heart of the great Sierra Madre range. A numerous people once roved among the precipitous abysses and lofty pines of the formidable wilderness of rock. Who these folk may have been, how many hundreds or thousands of years ago they lived, why the living trace of them was destroyed, nobody knows.

Their tombs are found in the innumerable limestone caves scattered throughout the country. Vestiges of their barbaric civilization have been left in the wilds to mystify later men who have followed the pioneer footsteps into the mazes of the mountains.

It is due in a large measure to the character of the country that brigands and guerrillas and raiding bands of Indians have thrived for so many generations in Sonora. An outlaw gang appears from nowhere in a sudden foray on the settlements, and disappears under the noses of the harried rurales. Let the fugitives gain the baffling labyrinths of the barrancas, and they are lost to pursuit until hunger or boredom or the lure of the outer world brings them forth again.

The barrancas are cracks in the mountains, twisting in haphazard lines, this way and that, crisscrossing each other, like the creases in the palm of the hand. They are monstrous gashes in the earth, narrow gorges pinched between stupendous ridges, walled in passages that at times reach depths of four and five thousand feet—cordons running between mile-high cliffs.

The bottoms usually may be reached,

but there are profundities here and there that have never been plumbed. Because he knew no other place of safety, Toomey, that night, led his companions into the barrancas.

The early part of their descent was not difficult, and even after darkness overtook them the mountain-trained horses picked their way down the first slopes without misstep. A faint illumination was shed by the stars, and later, before they reached the dangerous stretches of ground, a full moon came up above the peaks to cast a genial radiance among the rocks.

Toomey went in the advance, choosing the trail. Herminia followed. The Mexican girl probably had been raised from childhood in a saddle, and she sat her rawboned broncho to-night with facile grace, cuddling Apache in her arm. Third in line rode Jay Coulter, and she too appeared to be an experienced horsewoman.

Curzon purposely lagged a few paces in the rear. Before they had traveled far his stiff muscles seemed to grow more flexible, and he found himself gradually accustoming his body to the lift and fall of his easy-gaited mount. He had an athlete's natural resilience and sense of balance. He had a feeling that in another day or two of this he would be riding well enough to keep from betraying himself—as long as he stayed on a gentle horse.

After they had left behind them the first pitch of the plateau, they passed over a row of pine-crowned terraces that went down in a series, like steps. A brook gurgled along among stones in a rush for the bottom levels, and they allowed the water course to find them the shortest paths of descent. For two or three miles they followed the tortuous stream, and presently a broad and shallow valley opened up before them.

Farther on the walls of the valley began to close together and change from the appearance of hillocks to rising cliffs. The declivity took a steeper slant and the weathered, slippery rocks under foot were a growing menace for unwary travelers.

It was like going down into cellars and subcellars. They plunged deeper and deeper between the mounting canyon walls, and the ground continued always to drop away before them, as though they never were to reach the ultimate depths.

The brook went along companionably with the horses, sometimes running smoothly between level banks, sometimes surging in rapids or diving over the shelves in arching waterfalls. For stretches the riders were forced to dismount and lead their horses down precarious rock slides or along spray-drenched ledges. Again they were back in the saddles, confidently trotting down pathways that reached ahead of them, as smooth and unbroken as concrete paving.

The light from overhead grew dimmer as the battlements of the cliffs rose to block out the sky line, the shadows thickened, and for a long while the horses moved gingerly in obscuring darkness. Later the moon pushed its face over the top of the ridge and seemed to sit for a while on a jagged edge of rock, far overhead. Then sailed out across the rift to shine directly down into the deepest parts of the barranca.

Inch by inch, as though it swung from an invisible bridge, the moon crossed the narrow gap between the cliffs, and finally touched the opposite ridge to melt slowly from view. For a time a brilliant reflection struck back from the higher wall, but the shadow crept upward to blot out the afterglow, leaving only the star stream above, winding like a river between black, close-set banks.

The fugitives followed this river of stars in aimless meandering, penetrating deeper into the walled-in darkness be-

low. But some time after midnight they reached a triangular stretch of ground, where the canyon widened out for a space, and here they decreed a halt. There was scant danger of an enemy trailing them into the catacombs at night.

The horses had stood up stanchly through a wearying journey, and were entitled to rest. Human nerves were worn by hours on the perilous road. The travelers unsaddled, picketed the animals where there was forage along the brook, and then they spread blankets on the rocks.

The new day, drab and dispiriting, stole over the top of the barranca walls and seeped to the depths to reveal the four runaways astir on the shelf beside the brook. They were rustling water and driftwood, tending their fire and toasting strips of venison on willow switches. A chilling wind might be howling over the upper ridges, but down in the canyon bottoms the air was as still as a vacuum, so muggy and warm that the girls' thin, sleeveless party dresses were sufficient covering for their bodies.

Herminia was rather out of sorts this morning. The towering precipices seemed to overawe her. She drooped pettishly by the fire, chewing her broiled steak sullenly and having nothing whatever to say.

Jay Coulter, on the other hand, who usually was much less talkative than her chatty friend, this morning was brimming with conversation. It was amazing how she could have passed through terrors and hardships to wake up in a reckless humor to face to-day's uncertainties.

She was interested in everything about them—the height of the walls, the little fish that leaped out of the brook, the bald eagle that looked no bigger than a wren as he dipped for a moment into the gorge. She was fascinated at Toomey's method of cooking over coals and the possibility of reaching a cave that yawned in the sandstone far above them.

A while before she had gone around a bend of the brook to bathe, and her skin was wholesomely aglow when she came sauntering back to the fire. She had tried to comb her reddish-chestnut hair into some semblance of order, without much success, and somehow had evened the frayed edges of her skirt. That was all she could do for appearance's sake. She was hungry after her sleep, and she ate her breakfast with unstinted relish, like any other healthy young animal.

"I know where we're going," she remarked to Curzon as she spitted another piece of meat on a broiling stick. "The ridge that looks like a streak of lightning. You've got a cave there."

He was watching her pensively, engaged by the strange variability of her dark-lashed eyes. Last evening her eyes were soft and dreamy, tinged with a haze of gold. This morning they held a rich, translucent tint of old sherry, and were eagerly awake.

"What makes you think I've got a cave?" asked Curzon.

"Oh, I've heard so. I heard all about it. And I know it's somewhere underneath that glistening pile of rocks we saw last night."

"Outcrop of ore," put in Toomey. "Maybe it's iron pyrites, or maybe mica or maybe a ridge of solid silver. Nobody knows, because nobody's ever been able to climb to the top. But we ain't stoppin' there."

"We'll have to work out the crossword puzzle of the barrancas," said Curzon. "There's nothing else to do but keep going until we can find our way through to the other side of the mountain."

"And what then?" asked Jay.

"If we can do that," answered Toomey soberly, "we win the engraved pewter cup for havin' the prettiest bathin' suits in the pageant." He tucked his

crutch under his arm, hoisted himself to his feet, and stumped off to round up the horses.

When they had halted in the night they supposed they were camping on a ledge where the gorge widened out. After they remounted and started to ride forward, it was discovered that the expansion of ground was due to the conjunction of their canyon with another deep fissure breaking through the cliffs at the north.

This new passage was one of the side-shoots that zigzag all directions through the mountains. The system of barrancas was like a great, roofless mine, with lateral shafts and branch workings honeycombing the earth.

Because their chasm seemed to be a main stem and continued on a westerly slant, they ignored the opening of the fork and kept on with the descending brook. Toomey, as before, rode in the lead, and Herminia followed with Apache on her arm, a dejected figure looking pathetically small and slight on a huge roan broncho.

For a distance Jay trailed a few lengths behind Herminia, but as she was crossing a wet ledge her horse lost his footing and landed on his haunches, to slide in a sitting posture over the slope of rock and toboggan into the brook. It was not much of a drop, and the girl stuck in the saddle.

Curzon was behind her and witnessed the mishap, but before he really had time to be alarmed, she had jerked her mount to his feet and was wading through the shallows. By the time she forced the floundering horse out of the brook and back on the rail Toomey and the Mexican girl had turned a corner of the wall ahead and were lost to view.

"If it had been a thousand feet instead of six it would have been the same thing, only different," Jay observed with a smile, as Curzon caught pace with her again. "I'm going to take it a little easier."

She caught a firmer grip on the reins and they rode ahead. They were under the "lightning ridge," a redoubtable mass of rock that rose sheer and shadowy to the blue ribbon of the sky. There was a grandeur of beauty in the towering cliff, and also the ugliness of defacement and decay. Measured by the scale of the crawling humans at its base, its proportions were appalling.

Curzon was shambling along at the heels of Jay's horse, feeling himself a tiny and exceedingly humble part of the scheme of things, when, to his gaping astonishment, a bright, glistening object of some sort came *zinging* down from the heights to hit the rocks near by with a hard, metallic clang.

"What was that?" gasped Jay, pulling up her horse with a jerk.

Curzon had no idea what it was. The missile had struck near the edge of the brook and lodged between two stones. He got out of the saddle and picked up an empty tin can.

"Boston baked beans, with pork and tomato sauce," he read aloud from the label. The tin apparently had just been opened.

"But—who——" Jay strained her neck to gaze upward.

"Never heard of the Indians eating 'em out of a can. They bake 'em themselves in the ground. Must be a white man. Way up there. Must be a shelf or a cave on the other side of the bulge."

The girl swung around to face him. "You know very well there's a cave—your den! And you know who it was that threw the can."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CAVE IN THE CLIFF.

CURZON laughed amiably. As long as she persisted in believing that he kept a sort of ogre's hang-out in the neighborhood, let her go on thinking so. Perhaps the real Da Luz did

resort to these cliffs when he went in hiding. The disconcerting notion struck him that the unseen bean-eater might even be the famed Da Luz himself. Things more improbable than that had been happening in the last day or two.

"Whoever it is," he said evasively, "let him keep his roost for all I care. I know better places than this one."

"There must be a path to take you up." With her customary impulsiveness Jay swung out of her saddle. "Show me."

"Don't be silly. What for?"

The girl paid no heed to the question. She moved a foot around a shoulder of rock, and a moment later he heard her calling to him. He followed to find her standing at the bottom of a narrow slanting ledge that curved downward from the upper reaches of the precipice to the canyon floor. The person who flung the can undoubtedly had climbed from here. The incline went upward at a pitch not too steep to afford a footpath to the first overhang of rock, a hundred feet or so above them.

"I'm going up," Jay announced.

"No, you're not."

For a moment Curzon's sharpening glance conflicted with hers. Jay filled her lungs and her chin lifted stubbornly. Her eyes were neither dreamy nor humorous now, but took on the cool, stolid luster of amber.

"Try and stop me!" she said.

She scrambled over the fanlike pile of rubble at the foot of the slope, and Curzon instantly sprang after her. Just as he was reaching up to grab her foot they heard a rattle of stones in the canyon below them, and both caught themselves and turned to look. Toomey and Herminia shoved their horses around the flank of the wall, coming back.

"No good!" called Toomey, his eyes opening a trifle wider at sight of the dismounted pair on the ledge. "This barranca is a dud. Ends in a blind corner a couple of hundred yards from here. A pocket without a hold in it. No gettin' through."

"What becomes of the brook?" asked Curzon.

"Dives under the cliff where we can't follow. We've struck the wrong shoot, that's all." Toomey reached into his shirt pocket for a crumpled tobacco sack and papers, and started leisurely rolling himself a cigarette. "Guess again, Mr. Puzzle Sharp. We have to go back and start over aga——"

His jaw sagged on the word and his eyes narrowed somberly as his glance traveled up the canyon. In sharp foreboding the others turned to stare. Around a bend of the narrow defile, not a quarter of a mile away, a line of men and horses, came winding down between the gloomy cliffs in a slow, lengthening file.

The half-rolled cigarette dropped from Toomey's fingers, and he ducked low, as though he still hoped to keep out of sight. "Not rurales," he said. "Barboza's outfit, I guess."

The approaching riders were nearing the forking passage. There was no chance of the fugitives reaching the opening between the canyons. They were caught in a blind alleyway, penned between half-mile-high walls.

Curzon motioned to Herminia to dismount. "There's a shelf above us that we can reach," he said, and nodded grimly to Jay. "You wanted to go up. Well, go on up."

They abandoned their horses at the bottom of the gorge and started to climb the path that sloped up somewhere across the face of the cliff.

The ascent was less difficult even than it had appeared from the bottom. For a distance upward the ledge shelved broadly, and they were able to climb abreast. Higher up the path dwindled to a rib of rock that reached across the face of the precipice like a molding on a wall. Along the narrowed stretches

they were forced to separate and mount one at a time. Curzon had taken the lead, and Jay crawled after him. Toomey followed in the rear with Herminia, giving her a steadying hand when she needed it and doing his best to laugh away her fears.

The furrowed path was worn smooth and deep, as though countless feet had labored up the steeps before them. Or perhaps the gouging of the rocks was due merely to age-long weathering. But there was somebody ahead of them, and whoever he was he so far had refused to show himself. As he worked his way up the slanting groove Curzon kept a wary eye on the cornice that hid the upper part of the cliff, prepared either to parley, or to take lodgment by force.

He breathed much easier when he finally stuck his head through a breach in the rock and clambered over the top of the overhanging shelf. Before him a deep, triangular niche dipped back into the precipice. He had fully expected to find a cave, and he took it quite as a matter of course to see a dark, vague opening looming mysteriously in the shadow of the rocks. There was nobody on the ledge or in the cavern mouth.

Curzon moved over to make room for the others, and sat on the sheer rim of the ledge, dangling his feet into space, and looking down to the floor of the canyon. It was a long way to the bottom, but the sense of height did not especially disturb him. Compared to the vast stretch of the cliff above him his modest perch did not seem very lofty.

He gazed over the brink. Jay came up beside him. They had no thought of concealment. Their horses would be trapped below, and the men who caught them, of course, would know where the riders had gone.

The line of horsemen was pattering along the brook, and even at the distance Curzon could see faces staring up at him. The mounted shapes had a queer, flattened look when viewed from so far above. He did not bother to count them, but at a guess he would have said there were seventy or eighty men moving in the canyon.

Near the head of the straggling file he discovered a grotesque figure in a black hat as big as an umbrella. This man's head and shoulders were so monstrous that he seemed to spread out on both sides of his cream-colored pony. Although his face was hidden by the sombrero Curzon was positive that this man was Barboza.

If any doubt remained, it was immediately dispelled. Some of the riders pulled carbines from their saddleboots. A couple of seconds later, a rattle of shots echoed in the gorge. Several bullets clipped the ledge and dusted the cliff wall.

Curzon hastily thrust Jay back out of danger's way. When the others came up over the brink of the shelf, he also drew out of sight. As long as they kept away from the edge, the brown lip of stone hid them from the men below.

"Warm morning for this time of year," remarked Toomey, panting a bit from his climb. "But it looks like a nice, cool cave. Looks like cliff dwellers used to live here, in the days before there was elevators."

Curzon told him of the bean can that had soared out of the sky. "Haven't seen the chap who threw it overboard, but there must be somebody around."

"Who?"

"I'm going to explore the place and find out. While I'm gone will you sit here and watch the path? Don't imagine any of the bandits has the nerve to try the climb in the daylight, when they've got to come one at a time. Yet they might."

"Wish they would," said Toomey as he unlimbered his carbine and sprawled at ease on the rock. "I do wish they would."

Jay said she would go with Curzon,

but Herminia, who appeared to be very listless to-day, decided to stay where she was. Apache stayed with his owner.

The cavern entrance was shaped like a slot in a mail box, a dozen feet or more in width, and almost high enough to enter without stooping. Inside the ceiling rose in an arched dome of solid rock that reached at least a dozen feet or more above a tall man's head.

The main chamber, which was clearly revealed in the gray light from the open doorway, would have offered spacious quarters for two or three families of cavemen. And it was evident at a glance that the place at one time or another had been the abode of some huddling group of mountain people.

Under the cavern roof were the remnants of roofless houses, walls of stone and a sort of hardened, grayish cement, which partitioned the space into a series of small, snug rooms. Here and there, on smooth surfaces of rock, quaint, rude drawings and decorations were visible in the gloom.

Several of the murals were shaped like the magic swastika, others were merely stiff representations of birds and animals and men. On the front of a hive-shaped structure of wattles and concrete, that perhaps had once been used as a granary, some forgotten artist had carved a plausible picture of an ear of corn.

The roof was blackened from the smoke of cooking fires. The clean, dry air held no scent of must or decay, yet the marks of human workmanship gave an impression of enormous age.

Even Curzon, whose knowledge of anthropology was slight, realized instinctively that they had stumbled upon the dwelling place of men who had lived and disappeared from the earth before civilized history was ever written.

There was evidence everywhere of ancient occupation, but no sign of recent tenants. Curzon and the girl exchanged a glance of disquiet.

"That bean can didn't blow over with a breeze," said Jay. "There had to be somebody here. Where is he?"

"How do I know? Maybe this tenement has apartments higher up."

She fixed him for a moment with a queer, speculative look in her eyes, and then turned away. "I'm going to see what I can find," she announced.

They had supposed that the cavern was one big chamber. They soon found, however, a vaulted passage cut in the rear wall, leading—they could not imagine to what subterranean depths.

The opening was three or four feet wide and high enough for entrance without knocking their heads. Without an instant's hesitation Jay started to push her way into the dark tunnel, but her companion caught her arm and pulled her back.

"Just a minute!" he said, and went in ahead of her.

It was impossible to see anything in the black gallery. Curzon felt cautiously forward with every step, groping along the smooth-worn walls. Jay followed him closely.

The confined air was surprisingly dry and fresh. As they advanced they felt the fanning of a decided draft, like the drawing of a chimney flue. Evidently there was an outlet somewhere at the farther end.

For thirty or forty paces they felt their way through smothering darkness. Presently a patch of sickly, grayish light showed up ahead of them. Suddenly, as they turned a sharp bend, a streak of bright sunlight dazzled their eyes. An exit yawned ahead in the eroded rock.

The passage narrowed at the turn and the roof sloped lower. By stooping they made their way to the end of the tube. They came out into the open air on a shelf overlooking another deep gorge that ran parallel with the canyon they had just left behind.

Curzon needed but a glance across the magnificent chasm before him to

straighten out his mind on local topography. He had thought that the cliff they climbed to reach the cave was the face of a sheared-off mountain.

Now he saw that the supposed mountain was only a partitioning ridge, an astounding wall of rock, not a hundred yards thick at the base, attaining breath-taking heights and stretching away for miles. It ran lengthwise between two deeply cut barrancas, separating one canyon from the other by an insurmountable and apparently endless barrier.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRAPPED.

UNLIKE the cavern entrance on the opposite side, there was no sloping footpath to the gorge below. The outer edge of the shelf dropped off like a plummet. Curzon's first disappointment changed to hopefulness a moment later. He discovered that the front section of the cliff had split away vertically from the main mass leaving a slanting fissure that reached from the top of the ledge down toward the floor of the canyon.

"Do you suppose you could climb down through that crack?" he asked.

Jay had come to peer over his shoulder. "I guess I could," she replied, "if the outer scale didn't break off the rest of the way and take me with it."

Curzon stared silently into the crevice. The fracture extended almost to the base of the cliff. A few more weeks or months of weathering undoubtedly would cut the last point of cleavage. When that happened, the entire face of the precipice must flake off in a hundred-foot slice and crash into the barranca.

In his judgment, however, the final splitting-off was not likely to take place to-day or to-morrow. As long as the sheet of rock stood up under its own weight, it probably would sustain the added straw's weight of a man climbing in the crack.

"If we're to get away from Barboza," he said, "we'll have to take the chance. There's nothing else we can do."

"All right." Jay made her decision with her usual promptness. "I'll go back for the others."

"There's no rush about it," Curzon grinned at her. "You're so darned impetuous I can't keep up with you." He sat down on the ledge and stretched himself languorously in the warming sunlight. "It's quite a remarkable view from here."

"When I have something to do, I like to get it done," she said.

"It's wisest to stay here until dusk. If we left now, Barboza's men might climb up through the cave, find out how we got away and start right after us. But if we wait until nearly dark, the lack of light would probably hold them up until next morning. That would give us a full night's start. Meantime, I don't think they'll bother us much. Toomey and his carbine could hold a regiment off that narrow path. Sit down and take it easy."

She did not answer. He looked around to see her trying to look past the outthrust of the cliff above her.

"What do you suppose became of the man who eats pork and beans?" she asked him. "Is there another cave higher up?"

"Couldn't tell you," he answered lazily.

"You've never been here before—on your word of honor?"

"Never."

She twisted her head back and forth, as though to get rid of a crick in her neck, then turned abruptly to face him. "I suppose you'd lie about it if it suited your purpose."

"I suppose I would," he agreed amiably.

"Yes," she remarked with unexpected bitterness in her voice. "A bandit's word wouldn't amount to much." With an expressive shrug she moved away to investigate the inner recess of the ledge.

Curzon leaned back on his elbow and relaxed indolently to bask in the sun. He was watching a distant speck in the air—an eagle or buzzard—wheeling above a remote, blue summit, when he heard Jay give a sudden exclamation. She came back across the shelf, carrying a pottery bowl in her hands.

"I found it in the drift by the tunnel," she said. "Indian pottery—probably very old."

"Must have washed out of the cliff," he remarked.

The bowl, which was rudely shaped in the outline of a horned toad, was moulded of some sort of fine, white clay and fire-baked to a glossy patina. Queer little figurines of men and animals were stenciled around the lip of the vessel.

"My father'd be mad about it," she said. "He's an M. A., LL. D., and nearly all the rest of the alphabet—an anthropological bug from the American museum. A collector of ancient things like this. He'd tell you the full history of this bowl, whether you believed him or not."

Curzon regarded her questioningly. He cared little about Indian pottery and nothing whatever about the number of letters Jay's father could write after his name. On the other hand he could not help admitting to himself that he had grown vitally interested in the anthropologist's daughter. This was the first information about herself that she had given him.

"You're from New York?" he asked.

She nodded vaguely. "Mostly, I guess."

"How do you happen to be in this country?"

"Oh, I came along with Herminia. We were in school together and have been friendly ever since."

She put down the bowl and sat on the rock beside him.

"If you and Herminia are such good friends," he mused, "you must have abetted her in that frame-up wedding. Just what was your reason for that?"

She met his glance with an elusive smile. "You cling to your ideas, don't you? Now it's my turn to ask one. I've been wondering about it quite a bit in the last couple of days. Whatever made a man like you a criminal?"

He turned sharply to encounter her glance. Her smile had vanished. The eyes that searched into his were strangely gentle, almost wistful.

"Circumstances force you into things," he said after an interval. "I just happened to get started that way, that's all."

"Circumstances don't keep you that way. It's laziness." She faced him with a touch of scorn. "It means you're too lazy to work, doesn't it?"

"Now wait a minute," he protested. "You've seen something of a bandit's life. Do you think it's a lazy man's job?"

"Anything but!" she admitted, and she softened toward him a little. "Is it just a love of excitement, then, Ruy?"

"If it is, I'm ready to tell you that I'm about fed up on it."

"You mean—you'd quit this sort of thing? You'd get yourself a job?"

"I'd be almost tempted to—if I happen to live."

"What? A man like you could do anything if he tried!" She leaned toward him, and her speech came in a rush of eagerness. "Oh, if you only would!"

"I know a good deal about farming machinery. I might get a job selling farm machinery."

He was longing to tell her that he was only Willie Curzon, a law-abiding citizen of the United States, who had never robbed anybody. But he quieted the impulse, remembering that in her dealings with him she had been anything but frank.

Besides, while they were in their present dangerous plight, it was as well to let her go believing him to be the daunt-

less, invincible Da Luz. At times he tried his best to think so himself.

"It's foolish to be talking about jobs and such things now, isn't it? If we ever get out of this place——"

"If we do, would you get away from this horrid sort of life? Won't you try to be honest? You've got it in you." She lifted her face beseechingly. "Ruy! Won't you? Please?"

"What does it matter to you?" He moved closer to her and tried to see her eyes. "Why are you so interested?"

"Why, I——" She twisted her fingers together and stared off across the ranges. "I don't know," she ended lamely.

"I suppose you know I'm in love with you, Jay," he said very quietly.

He saw her shoulders grow tense, but her head was turned the other way, and he was unable to see her face.

"In two days and nights?" she asked him under her breath.

"Yes. And if we're together two more days and nights, I'm afraid it'll reach a pretty desperate state."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," she said.

"So do I. Especially after you and Herminia cooked up the low-down deal you handed me in the priest's hut. I wish I didn't feel the way I do. I'd a whole lot rather not be in love with you."

"And you think you're married to Herminia?"

"I fear that I am," he groaned.

"Yet you dare say to me what you've just said?"

"Dare? Why, I'll tell Herminia. It's the truth. I'll tell everybody."

"You married Herminia because she's rich," said Jay, in a measured, far-away voice. "You thought that by forcing her to become your wife you'd get your finger into the Amor estates. You ——" She stopped, as though something had come into her throat to choke her. "Don't—don't talk to me!"

"What do you mean?" he demanded angrily. "You know very well that I was forced into that marriage with Herminia——"

"Don't lie about it, please," she cut in, and as she turned to him he saw stark unhappiness in her misty eyes. "You're just a rotter, Ruy.

"And that's what makes me hate myself so," she went on bitterly. "To think that I—that I haven't enough character to save myself from—that I'm weak enough and idiotic enough to allow myself even for a minute to—to——"

"What?" he asked breathlessly. "Jay? You don't mean——"

"I don't mean a thing!" she declared harshly. She stood up abruptly, and her smile was a bright, defensive shield. "I'm going back," she said.

She started to move away, then stopped suddenly to crouch down and peer over the side of the ledge. "Look!" she gasped, her fingers clutching his sleeve.

He crept forward and looked into the depths of the barranca below. Along the rocky cut almost directly beneath him rode a brown-clad file of horsemen. They were all in uniform, and by the hats he knew them to be rurales.

There were a dozen or so in the party. The horses carried saddlebags, and the riders seemed to be accoutered for warfare. A lank, loose-jointed man led the troop.

"That looks like Lieutenant Aldape," remarked Curzon. "I guess they're hunting for me."

"Shh!" Jay breathed in his ear. "Keep quiet!"

"Why?" He grinned wickedly. "It was only a day or two ago when you were going to collect ten thousand pesos for Da Luz, dead or alive."

"Ah, no!" The reminder appeared to horrify her. "Please don't!"

The men rode along with drooping heads, and evidently had no inkling that eyes were looking down upon them.

"Better call them, just the same," said Curzon. "There aren't enough of them to fight the bandits. But they can take you away with them. Go on. Let 'em know you're here."

She looked at him with tragic eyes. "You think I would—after all you've done for me? Why, if they knew we were here they'd arrest you and——"

"Shoot me," he supplied coolly. "I guess they would. But what's that got to do with you? One rotter fewer in the world."

She shuddered, and her hand crept forward to lay upon his.

"Listen, Jay," he said soberly, as his fingers curved and closed over her fist. "There's no use kidding ourselves. We don't stand much chance of getting away from Barboza, without horses. We have neither food nor water up here.

"They're bound to get us in the end. When they do, that means my finish, too. So I'm not losing anything, whichever way it breaks. But for you this is a big streak of luck. Tell 'em to come on up."

She huddled closer to the rock and stubbornly shook her head. "I won't!" she whispered.

"All right then; I will!" Curzon drew a sharp breath and stood up.

Jay also scrambled to her feet. There was a swift, shadowy movement behind him. Something crashed upon his head with a shattering thud, and the world turned to blackness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TENANT OF THE CLIFF.

THE awakening from the stupor of a knock-out blow is a tedious and, usually, an annoying process. While the victim is completely unconscious he is required neither to feel, nor reckon the minutes, nor struggle against his fate. It is a state of absolute peace.

It does not last, however.

While Curzon's mind was swimming back through gray billows of blankness, he thought once that he felt the earth tremble and rock under his shoulders. That was delusion, probably. Also, no doubt, he was afflicted with a further hallucination when he imagined for a space that quivering, soft lips were touching his throbbing temples.

It was only seconds later, perhaps—or it may have been a long interval—when he blinked feebly and stared up into a pair of wet, frightened eyes that yearned closely above him.

"Jay?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes," whispered a stifled voice.

He stirred slightly. As the girl bent over him something wet and warm splashed down on his cheek.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, caught between tears and laughter. "So sorry."

With an effort of will he fixed his attention upon her. "What are you crying about?"

"I—I don't know. I just thought maybe you were—— It took you so long to look up at me."

He relaxed with a sigh, liking the touch of her hands in his hair. His brain was clearing rapidly. He imagined he could stand up if he wanted to. But why bother? It was much pleasanter not to move. "What happened to me?" he asked after a moment.

"I crowned you with the horned-toad bowl," she said.

"You—what?"

"I slugged you from behind."

Curzon promptly sat up. His head ached abominably. He still felt dizzy, but he could see clearly enough to read the look of her half-abashed, half-defiant eyes.

"Why did you do a fool thing like that?" he demanded.

"You were going to call the rurales. And I didn't want you to."

His searching blue eyes examined her in wonderment. "You threw away a chance like that—for me?"

"At the fiesta the other night," she

said. "you threw away your only chance —for me."

"You were just paying back a debt, then?" He watched her in tingling curiosity. "Was that your only reason?"

"No," she said musingly. "I didn't stop to think of it that way. I just— when I saw what you were going to do —I picked up the bowl without thinking, and hit you."

He put up his hand tenderly to rub an ugly lump that had formed on his cranium above his left ear. "How long was I out?" he asked.

"Several minutes. I was getting scared." She smiled unsteadily. "I wouldn't want to murder anybody, even to save 'em from being shot."

"The rurales have gone?"

She nodded without speaking.

With a gingerly movement he raised himself to his knees, and then stood up on his feet. "Wow!" He grimaced. "You carry a wallop!"

"I'm afraid," she said contritely, "that I'm stronger than I thought."

"Well, I don't see what you've accomplished. I'll see that you don't slug me again. And it'll be easy enough for me to follow the rurales and bring them back."

"Not so easy," she said, looking toward the cliff.

His glance shifted with hers. He took a step forward to gaze down in open-mouthed astonishment. The crevice he had counted on as a means of descent had disappeared.

The outer scale of the rock had peeled away from the main precipice and lay in a ruinous heap at the bottom of the barranca, far below him. A bare wall fell away at his feet in a sheer hundred-foot drop. "What happened?" he asked, astonished.

"There was a stick of dynamite in your shirt pocket, already primed," she said. "And matches."

He stared at her, aghast. "You— dynamited the crack?"

"I waited until the rurales had gone far enough, so they wouldn't hear. It was quite amazing, the way the whole front of the cliff bulged out from the rock behind it and toppled down into the canyon. I wish you could have been conscious, and could have seen it."

"Good heavens!" exploded Curzon. "You're absolutely crazy!"

"I'm worse than that, I guess," she admitted. "I'm feeble-minded."

"Why did you do it?"

The girl's golden eyes sought his for a moment—then wavered and looked away. "I don't know."

"I suppose you know what you've done." His mouth was hard and unforgiving. "You've ruined our only hope of escape."

"The rurales couldn't get you now, Ruy," she observed irrelevantly, "even if they should come back this way."

He glowered helplessly. "What you need," he declared, "is a—a darned good beating!"

"I ought to have had that last night." She sighed miserably and shook her head in self-despising. "But it wouldn't do any good now. It's too late."

"You've not only destroyed our chance of leaving this place," he summed up remorselessly, "but you've burned up our last stick of dynamite. We may want it badly in the final pinch."

"I'd do it again, I guess," she answered in a moody voice.

His eyes flickered and their icy blueness warmed suddenly into ardent glowing. "Jay," he said, "are you telling me that you think enough of me to do a foolish thing like that?"

"I haven't said why," she answered, under her breath.

"You've thrown everything else away," he pursued solemnly. "And you've almost told me why." His brows knitted in startled recollection. "I recall now, when I was coming out of my stupor, I felt the jar of the explosion. And I remember something else."

"You think I kissed you when you didn't know—I mean, when I thought you didn't know?" she asked. "If I did, it would mean that I love you, and didn't want you to know."

"Did you, Jay?"

Her lips trembled. "I want to tell you something, Ruy," she said. Her tone was quiet, without any trace of emotion. "If I were in love with you—I mean, if I found it to be such a big and overpowering thing that I couldn't fight it—if I were as weak and wicked as that—I'd walk to the edge of that cliff now and jump, and end it."

She waited for a moment. "Do you understand, Ruy?"

He nodded wearily. "Yes."

"And that's that, isn't it? No more talk about it?"

"No more talk."

She brushed her fist across her eyes, and laughed and tossed back her tangled hair. Then her hand reached forward and gently patted his sleeve. "I'm sorry I had to wallop you," she said, "but I'm not sorry that I blew up the cliff. You'll have to find another way out."

He reflected grimly. "That'll mean a rope," he said. "About a hundred feet of rope to let ourselves over the side of this cliff."

"Yes," she agreed. "But where are you going to get it?"

"Barboza'll have plenty of picket lines for his horses. We'll need three or four."

Her eyelashes fluttered in alarm. "But you don't mean——"

"To-night, some time, when their camp's quieted down, I'll go down there and see what I can pick up." He started to whistle a little tune, trying to appear casual about it.

"Why, you'd be insane!" she objected

"If you can think of anything better, we'll try your way first."

He resumed his careless whistling, then the sound expired on his lips. His head drew around slowly. He stared at a strange, black shadow that had fallen across the ledge.

It was a curious silhouette, distorted by the angle of the sun, but shaped like a man's foot and lower leg.

Curzon blinked and lifted his glance. He saw a scuffled tan shoe and a pin-striped trousers leg feeling the way downward from a stud of rock a short distance above him.

"How do you do?" Curzon greeted the apparition in a hushed and solemn voice. "We have here, perhaps, the señor who loves his beans."

As he looked on in lively curiosity, the first trousers leg was joined by a second, and both lengthened out into an entire pair of pants. The dangling feet of the partly revealed stranger groped on down, and found a niche of stone to stand in.

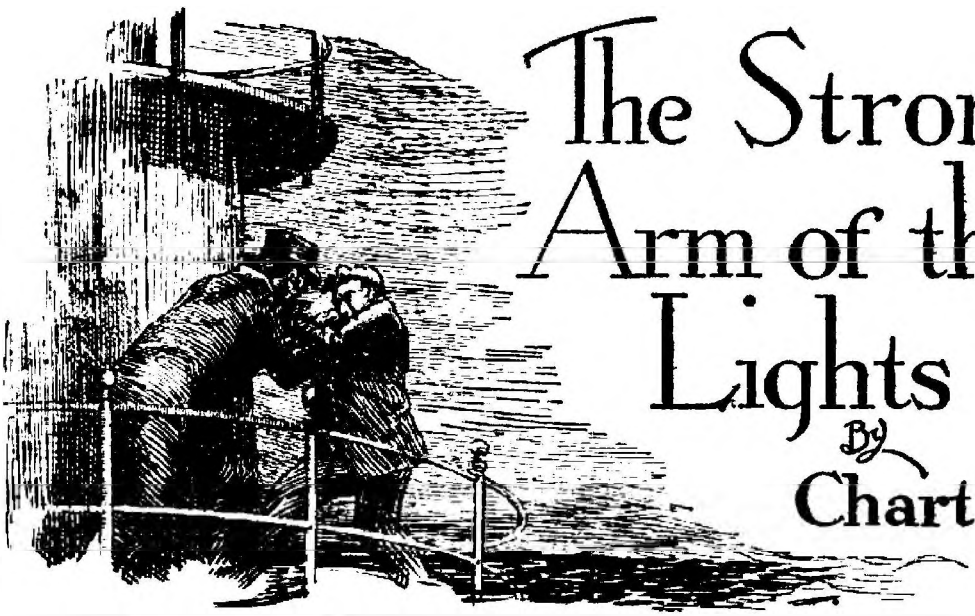
A rusty coattail came into view. One of the shoes fumbled for a foothold still farther down. A wrinkled coat back appeared—then a pair of thin, sloping shoulders.

Last of all the dome of a round, bald head caught the rays of reflected sunlight. A complete man was outlined above them, clinging to the face of the cliff.

The concluding installment of this adventure novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, dated and on the news stands February 15th.

A Lucky Thing

"THERE'S such a thing as overdoing this looking on the bright side business," said Billings. "The other evening I was at Jones', and Jones—you know how absent-minded he is—put the lighted end of a cigar in his mouth. He jumped three feet, rolled on the floor, and was a little noisy about it. In the middle of it all Mrs. Jones, smiling sweetly, said: 'How fortunate you were, dear, to discover it so soon!'"



The Strong Arm of the Lights

By Chart Pitt

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

FROM SHIP TO LIGHTS.

THE mate of the U. S. lighthouse tender *Basswood,* Bill Drake, stamped into the office and faced Superintendent Black who had ordered him up for a grilling.

"Mr. Drake, what do you mean by beating up the crew the way you did last night?"

The superintendent's voice had been shaken out of its official calm, and his eyes were snapping fire.

"I was obeying orders, sir," the mate put a hamlike hand on the desk and leaned closer to the man who swayed the destinies of the seventeenth lighthouse district. "The captain told me to go ashore and round up the crew and bring them aboard—and I rounded them up. Anything wrong in that, sir?"

"Anything wrong?" the old man exploded. "What do you think you are, a bucko mate aboard some whaler? Three of our best sailors are over in the hospital, and the rest of the crew have jumped ship."

"That's all right, skipper," the big mate grinned. "I'll go out and rustle a new crew for you. Just leave it to me. I'll get you an outfit of blue-water boys who know how to jump when you sing out the orders to them."

The superintendent waved him away.

"You are going aboard the *Basswood,* Mr. Drake, and sing out an order for somebody to pack your bag."

"Pack my bag—do you mean you are firing me for beating up a bunch of fo'c's'le rats when they refused to come aboard at sailing hour?"

Bill Drake's voice had lifted itself into a deep-sea challenge. It was a voice that could cut its way through the howling of any storm that ever blew at sea, and reach the men who flirted with death on the topmost yards.

The little room at the lighthouse office was too small to hold that bellowing cry. The windows rattled ominously, as though the belligerent tone waves were trying to break their way through the glass, and seek the broad sweep of the outside world.

The big mate of the *Basswood* had lifted himself on his toes. Like some

mighty leaning tower he stood there swaying with emotion, ready to come down and obliterate the little man who sat at the desk.

"We don't want to fire you, Mr. Drake. That is why we are asking for your resignation. You can go to-day and leave a clean page behind you. But if you stay, and we are forced to hold an official investigation, everything will have to go into the records."

Bill Drake's bones seemed to soften within him. His big body sagged out of shape, and he slumped down into a chair. Like a death-stricken giant he sat there staring at the little man on the other side of the desk.

"You don't need to take it so hard, Mr. Drake," the superintendent tapped nervously with his pencil. "You have got a ticket for the seven seas, and you can make better money on the outside than you can in the service."

"It is the first time I ever was fired," the mate gulped. "I have been sailing the sea since I was ten years old, and there never was a ship among them, that I couldn't go back to, and get my old berth back if I wanted it."

"You are a good man, Mr. Drake—perhaps too good a man for the lighthouse fleet. We are under the civil service now, and we have to use gloves when it comes to handling our sailors. You have been educated in a different sort of school, and I don't think you ever would fit in."

"A fellow can't be too good a man for the lighthouse service," Bill Drake leaned forward, and once more his jaw was thrust belligerently to the fore. "I have been steering my course by them lights for the last twenty years, and I know what they mean. I have brought my ship in under full sail, with the wind howling behind me, and where would I have been if one of them lights had gone out on me?

"But they didn't go out, skipper—they never go out. Through foul weather and fair they keep burning, and I knew a man was standing behind each beacon—knew he would die on his feet if need be, but that light of his wouldn't go out."

"I never supposed you felt that way about the service—never supposed you thought that way about the lights," the superintendent turned his face away.

"Thought about it?" Bill Drake staggered to his feet. "I haven't done anything but think about the lights for a long time. I was nothing but a kid when I sailed on the old *Sea Eagle*, and I was the first fellow aboard the ship to pick up the harbor light when we rounded in from the voyage. Windjammer or steam, it has been the same, the lights were always waiting to welcome when we lifted the landfall."

"I'll see that your record is clear, Mr. Drake," the superintendent reached a hand to the big mate. "I'll write you a recommendation that any man would be proud of—and nobody will ever know about that trouble on the *Basswood!*"

"I'd know all about it," Bill Drake said as he turned away. "A man can't go on sailing deep water forever—and I've been planning for years how I'd settle down ashore, and do my part with the lights."

"Hold on there a minute," George Black bounded to his feet, and approached the man who was too hard-fisted to hold down a berth in the lighthouse fleet.

Bill Drake waved him aside as he opened the door to go.

"You needn't bother—I wouldn't take a recommendation from the lighthouse service if you paid me for it."

"It isn't that. You said you wanted to do your bit with the lights, and I'm going to give you your chance."

"What do you mean—give me my chance?"

"I'll put you on detached duty, and send you out to Larrigan Island."

"I'm not asking for any charity," the

big sea dog growled. "I can still hold down a deep-water berth, and I won't have any trouble finding a ship."

"This isn't charity. You will earn your money out at Larrigan. I need a fellow like you for that station, and I'll consider it a personal favor if you will go."

"What is the matter with the place?" the man from the *Basswood* demanded.

The superintendent shook his head.

"That is just the trouble. Something is wrong out there, and I haven't been able to get a line on what is going on."

Bill Drake walked over and sat down on the corner of the desk.

"Things are just beginning to sound interesting," the hard-hitting mate said as he fished out his pipe and treated himself to a smoke. "Now if you will tip me off as to what I'm supposed to do, I'll go aboard and pack my bag."

"You are going to Larrigan Island on an emergency detail as assistant keeper. Hank Tuttle is in charge over there, and he will show you your work. The rest of it you will have to find out for yourself."

"Them are mighty slim sailing-orders, skipper." Bill shook his head. "You said there was something wrong out there, now just what do you mean by that?"

"Something has been happening to the assistants out there. We have sent three men out there this summer, and they have just dropped out of sight as though something had swallowed them."

"What does this fellow Tuttle have to say about the business? Seems like he ought to know what was wrong out there?" Bill suggested.

"I can't get anything out of him. He is one of the best keepers we have in the district. Won the efficiency pennant five years straight. His station always is as neat as a pin—but he is awfully close-mouthed. I had a hunch he had something on his mind that last time I was out there, but he wouldn't say anything. You will just have to go ahead and find out what you can by yourself."

"And if I find out—what then?"

"That is up to you, Mr. Drake. You brought that bunch of drunken sailors aboard last night, and got them there on sailing time, even if we did have to send some of them to the hospital. Now something tells me that you will take care of this business out at Larrigan, whatever it is."

"Then I'm going out there without any strings tied to me, am I?"

"You are going out *for the good of the service,* and after what you said about the harbor lights I know I can trust you. There is something out there at Larrigan that isn't written in the books, and you go ahead and straighten it out in your own way, and straighten it out right."

Bill Drake picked up his cap. "I can't say I'm hankering after this job at Larrigan, but when trouble is coming your way there is no use trying to dodge it. I'll go out and do what I can, but you don't want to expect too much of me. I ain't such a good man."

"You are good enough, judging from the looks of those fellows over in the hospital."

Superintendent Black stretched a hand to the mate. Bill closed the door behind him, and went stamping his heavy way down the stairs.

CHAPTER II.

ASHORE IN THE NIGHT.

NIGHT was falling over the Pacific when the lighthouse tender *Basswood* came pounding her way against the ebb tide, and swung in towards Larrigan Island.

Bill Drake looked out over the starboard bow, where a light was winking among the shore shadows. A thrill stirred his blood as he watched it. There was something sinister and suggestive about that mystery shrouded island

which had gulped men up and left no traces behind.

Dour and lonely it lay there in the wash of the running tide, a deeper blotch in the coastal gloom—a vague shape that crouched in the dark and waited for its prey. Death stalked its empty beaches. Men went out to Larrigan, and did not come back.

Still its beacon winked through the night, three measured flashes to the minute, keeping its faith with men and ships along that wild and rock-strewn coast.

As the *Basswood* passed the lower end of Larrigan, the searchlight was snapped on. For a moment the glaring beam played over the old, abandoned light-tower perched upon the high bluffs at the tip of the island.

A lonely and morbid spirit came to Bill Drake as he watched it. That old stone tower had outlived its usefulness, and the government had built a new and better lighthouse on the other end of Larrigan. As soon as the department got around to it, the old structure would be torn down, and the last chapter of its history would be written.

To-night it stood there in the glutting dark, with no light except the glimmer of the stars against the panes of her lifeless lantern, a beacon of the stormy seas whose day was dead and done.

The tender blew the station call as she slid in abreast of the landing. One moment the air was in vibration as the heavy steam whistle roared out its challenge. Then it ended, and a thousand ghostly voices took up the cry. From wave-washed reef and beetling bluff, each rock flung back its echo, and softening away they went muttering into the distance down the bleak and lonely coast.

The work boat took the water by the run, and six strong-armed sailors sent it sweeping toward the shore. The glass was going down, and the skipper was anxious to get back into shelter before a storm blew up. The tender hadn't wasted time to drop an anchor, but was hove-to under a slow bell, and was holding herself against the running tide. The landing party were in a hurry to get back to the ship.

Bill Drake leaped ashore the minute the boat touched. His bag was thrown to him as they backed away from the rocks.

He heard the squeak of gear as the boat was hoisted free of the water, and saw the twisting lights of the *Basswood* as she stood out to sea.

The hard-hitting sea dog shouldered his bag, and tramped up the path that led to the light tower. An alien spirit seemed to hover about the place. Bill glanced suspiciously about him in the dark.

It was the first time he ever had known of a tender calling at a light station, and not finding all hands at the landing to welcome them.

Drake glanced up at the light as he tramped along the path. It seemed that the lamp was not burning as bright as it had been a few minutes before.

He paused at the tower door and looked over toward the quarters. The buildings stood black and silent among the shadows. The light beams that slanted down from the revolving lens at the top of the tower, kept flashing their spot lights across the brown-painted roofs. There was no sign of life about the place.

Bill stepped into the tower and listened. Perhaps the keeper was up in the lantern, working on the light. No sound came down from the black spaces above him.

Groping his way to the stairs, he grasped the hand rail and began working his way up through the dark. The sound of his feet upon the iron steps awoke a multitude of echoes within the hollow tower. Higher he twisted his way, following the cork-screw stairs around the circular wall.

He bumped into a door, and knew that he had reached the service room beneath the lantern. Pushing it open, he stepped into the circular chamber that held the machinery that operated the revolving lens. The light from the lamp filtered down upon him. A short flight of stairs brought him to the main deck of the lantern. The place was empty, and the lamp was not burning as it should.

The new assistant went down to the service room and looked things over. The pressure gauges on both the oil tank and the compressed air showed that they had been pumped up to the limit.

He opened the valve on the oil line that led to the lamp, and instantly the big vapor burner flashed out its clear, white light.

Bill Drake nodded his head thoughtfully. Hank Tuttle had left the tower as soon as he had lighted the lamp, and hadn't waited to see that his valves were properly adjusted.

Conflicting emotions were tugging at Bill Drake's heart as he groped his way down the winding stairs. He stumbled out into the night, where the revolving spot lights made weird patterns in the dark, and the spirit of mystery walked the empty beaches.

Sitting down on his bag he tried to think things over. The beacon at Larrigan was in his keeping to-night. With his own hand he had tended it, just as he had so often dreamed of doing. But what had become of Hank Tuttle? What was the thing that had engulfed the assistants of that lonely light station, and had it at last reached out and caught the keeper within it deadly tentacles.

Bill Drake bounded to his feet. Shouldering his bag he stamped up the path toward one of the buildings. If there was trouble running loose at Larrigan Island he was going to meet it half way, and wasn't going to waste any time about it. He didn't know which one of the buildings was the assistant's quarters, and he didn't care. He was going to move in and make himself at home.

The door was unlocked, and he pushed it open. Scratching a match he lighted the brass lamp that stood upon the table. The door of the kitchen range was standing open, showing that a fire of dry kindling had been laid all ready for lighting. Bill touched it off, and shoveled some coal on top.

Lighting the tin hand lamp he began ransacking the pantry. If he was going to stand watch to-night he wasn't going to do it on an empty stomach. A half hour later his coffee was bubbling on the stove, and he had a rather presentable meal dished up on the table. Whoever it was that had occupied the quarters hadn't been robbing themselves of any calories. It wasn't famine that had driven men from Larrigan Island, or swallowed them up in the night.

As the new assistant moved up to the table, he glanced out of the window to see how the light was burning. Already he was beginning to feel a fatherly responsibility for that flashing beacon out there on the headlands of Larrigan.

He picked up his mug of coffee, and sipped at it thoughtfully. This was the hell station of the district; but the grub was good, and it might not be such a bad place after all.

Bill Drake set the mug back upon the table, and his muscles tightened expectantly. There was the sound of running feet in the night.

Up out of the darkness it came, a floundering tattoo that was drawing nearer along the beach bluffs.

The man at the table smiled to himself. Hank Tuttle was hot-footing it back to the station to see who it was that had moved in during his absence.

The door banged open, and a man in a keeper's uniform lurched in.

"What are you doing here?" he wheezed as he staggered toward the table.

"Just now I happen to be eating my supper," the mate speared another slice of bread. "You better sit up, Hank, and have a bite to eat with me. A shot of hot coffee will do you good after your trip."

A flash of something went into the keeper's face. He glanced at Bill's uniform cap that was hanging on a chair.

"Oh I see you are from the tender. I wasn't far away—just went out to the other boat-landing to pull my skiff up above the reach of the tide. When I heard the tender whistle, I started to climb up the bluff to save time. A piece of the bank slipped with me, and I landed on my head. I don't know just how long I was knocked out by the fall."

Bill Drake went on with his eating. He knew the keeper was lying to him, but this wasn't the time to tell him about it.

Hank Tuttle had come from a long distance, and he had come in a hurry. There were things going on around Larrigan Island that weren't right, and this fellow knew a whole lot more about it than he was letting on.

He was still panting from his long run when he moved up to the table. His hand shook like a leaf as he poured out his coffee.

"How did they come to leave you at the station?" he asked in an off-hand way, but Bill knew that it was an important matter to Hank Tuttle.

"They sent me out here to be your assistant for a while. I guess it was supposed to be a sort of punishment."

"A punishment?" the keeper turned and gave him a suspicious glance. "What do you mean by punishment?"

"Oh it wasn't much of anything to speak of. The boys got hold of some booze ashore last night and threw a little party aboard the *Basswood*. I had some trouble before I got through with it, and got in dutch with the superintendent. He called me up and gave me a hell of a wigging, and handed me a stretch of shore duty on top of it."

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF THE LARRIGAN LIGHT

BILL wasn't telling any out-and-out lies, but he was handling the truth rather recklessly. However, it wouldn't have caused him any very acute mental anguish if he had prevaricated a bit. Twenty years in the deep-water ships had hardened his hide till it was almost leather.

A square-shooter he always tried to be, but he didn't let the little frills hamper his style or gum up his game. When he went into a thing he went in to win, and Larrigan Island was no exception to the rule.

He was going up against big odds. Other men had come to that lonely light station, and something had caused them to disappear and no reasons given. He would have to watch his step day and night or he, too, would go to join the legion of missing men.

He had come to Larrigan Island with an open mind, but already he had developed some fixed opinions concerning Hank Tuttle. It was up to him to play the rôle of a trusting boob, but he was going to sleep with one eye open, and his best ear turned toward the world.

Bill Drake tarried long at the table, and he kept on eating after his appetite was satisfied. He knew the keeper was watching him, and taking his measure. Men with overloaded stomachs generally sleep soundly of nights. If Hank got the idea that his new assistant was a glutton, whose chief thought in life was to fill his paunch, it would allay any suspicions which his presence at Larrigan might have created.

The assistant pushed back from the

table. Going over to an armchair that looked as though it had been built for comfort, he dropped himself into its padded depths.

Fishing out his pipe he lighted the half-burned tobacco that remained in the bottom of the bowl, and took a few puffs. His head nodded drowsily, and he pulled himself up with a jerk.

It was the movement of a man who was overripe for his blankets, but Bill wasn't thinking about sleep. He had toughed it through many a deep-sea storm, without even closing an eye—and this thing at Larrigan was something worse than a storm at sea.

"If it is all the same to you, I won't go on watch till to-morrow." Bill blinked over at the keeper. "I was out with some of the boys last night, and we didn't get in till breakfast time this morning. If you show me where my bunk is, I'll be hitting the hay."

The keeper made no reply, but Bill knew that he had given him something to think about. The duty-dodging assistant slumped deeper into the chair. If Hank Tuttle got him on watch to-night he would have to hypnotize him to do it.

He hadn't been sent to Larrigan Island to tend the beacon, but to solve the mystery of the missing assistants. That was the job he was going to work on to-night.

Bill Drake raised a hand to his face, as though trying to wipe the sleep out of his eyes. For a moment he rallied, and took a couple of puffs at his pipe. The next minute his chin was slumping down upon his breast, and his closing lids shut out the yellow lamplight.

The man from the *Basswood* realized that he was taking a long chance when he closed his eyes at Larrigan Island. He was surrounded by unknown enemies, to whom human life was cheap, and any moment might bring a blow from the dark.

For the moment Bill Drake was blind to the world, but he was not as helpless as he appeared. The closing of his eyes had sharpened his ears, and they were doing double duty now.

He heard the labored breathing of Hank Tuttle beside him. His breath was coming more regularly now, and he knew that a change of emotion had come over him. The keeper of Larrigan Island was pleased that his new assistant had flunked his watch, and was going to let him stand a double trick to-night.

Bill made a mental note of it, and tucked it away in a front pigeon hole of his brain, where he would be sure to see it. There was something going on at the station which Hank Tuttle didn't want him to find out—and whatever it was, it was going to be pulled off to-night.

A surge of emotion went through the assistant's blood. Hank wasn't keeping faith with the lights, and he hated him because of it. He felt the nerves tingling in his finger tips. How he would have delighted in reaching across and grabbing that man by the throat, and choking the truth from his lips.

That was his way of fighting. When mutiny showed its head in the fo'c's'le, he always had been the first man to strike a blow. He didn't stop striking as long as there was anybody on their feet. He never had wasted time counting heads, when there were heads to be broken.

To-night it was something more than mutiny with which he had to cope. The honor of the lights was in his keeping, and he must not allow any personal emotions to interfere with the game he was playing.

Bill Drake held his breath and listened. His ears had caught a new sound. Out of the nowhere it had come, something that was too faint and too far to be given a name.

Like the ticking of a watch buried deep in some pocket, or the throbbing of

an overtaut vein, the thing kept tapping out its ghostly tattoo in the night. But it was not regular enough to be the ticking of a watch or pulsations.

He strained his ears trying to fix the exact location of the sound; but the thing faded out and was gone, like a distant radio station that had been tuned-out by an incautious twist of the dial.

It was something that was too faint for the normal human ear to detect. Bill Drake relaxed his muscles. Even the fiber of his brain was in a passive mood. Now he could hear the thing again, tapping out its ghostly signal in the night.

The assistant stirred uneasily in his chair. He blinked his eyes open, and looked drowsily about the room. The light keeper was sitting there watching him. Fishing out a match he made a clumsy attempt to light his pipe. He reached down to scratch it on the sole of his shoe.

A twist of his fingers caused the brittle wood to break, and the two ends fell to the floor. Bill let them lay where they were, as though he had forgotten all about wanting to smoke.

"You better go to bed, or you will be falling out of that chair and breaking your neck the first thing you know."

The assistant shook himself into motion. He grinned over at the light keeper as he wobbled to his feet. He had been waiting for that invitation for the last ten minutes.

The keeper of Larrigan led the way to the bedroom. He lighted the little lamp on the stand, and went and left his new assistant to his dreams. Bill blew out the light, kicked off his shoes, and crawled into bed the way he was.

Lying there on the soft mattress, the assistant found that it was no easy matter to keep awake. He had been pretending that he had been out the night before, and now he felt as though he really had.

Pulling the covers up over his head, he lay there peeping out of the narrow opening, and watching the flash of the lighthouse beacon as it slanted across the window. Hank Tuttle went out on the porch. It was getting time for him to go pump-up the air tank. As soon as he left, Bill intended to make his get-away.

The new assistant was tired, and that bed at the lighthouse had been built for sleep. A hundred times he felt the stupor creeping over him, and wiggled his fingers and toes in an effort to keep awake. He watched the flash of the light across the window, and counted each beam as it came.

Bill Drake's eyes snapped wide open, and the sleep stupor slipped from his brain. Pressed against the black pane of the window was a human face. Hank Tuttle was watching him to make sure that he had gone safely to bed, and was going to stay there.

A moment later the face slipped back and was gone. Bill uncovered his head and listened. There was the craunch of gravel along the walk that led to the light tower.

The assistant sprang from the bed. Gathering up an armful of clothing from the closet, he rigged up a dummy that looked like a sleeping man, and drew the covers up over it. Pulling on his shoes, he sneaked out of the back door. A moment later he was safely hidden among the blue-black gloom of Lannigan's night.

Crouching among the shadows that lay deep at the ground levels, Bill Drake worked his way along the hillside behind the light station. A fresh wind was blowing in from the sea, and the surf was hammering along the rocky coasts.

The spray-damp air whipped the last traces of sleep from his brain. Once more the hard-hitting mate of the *Basswood* was ready for the big adventure.

The keeper came down from the

tower and walked toward the quarters, with his lantern hung in the crook of his arm. The assistant edged further over on the hillside where he could keep an eye on the bedroom window.

Hank Tuttle turned down the flame of his lantern, and sat it on the porch. The lamp was burning in the front room, and Bill waited to see if he went inside. Minutes passed, still there was no sign of the door opening. If Hank had entered the building he had gone in the back way. If he had done that, there was some good reason behind it.

The spot lights from the revolving lens kept dancing their circle march in the dark, and one after the other they flashed across the face of the quarters.

Bill Drake smiled as he flattened himself to the ground. The keeper of Larrigan was back at the window to make sure that his new assistant was sleeping soundly.

With his ear pressed close to the dew-wet sod, Drake lay there watching his man. Once more he heard that strange tapping sound, and this time it was plainer. He lifted his head and looked about him. The noise ended as soon as his ear was raised from the ground.

The sea dog nodded his head thoughtfully. He didn't know the meaning of that tapping. Something told him that when he found out what it was, he would have solved the secret of Larrigan Island. That noise came from a considerable distance. Somewhere upon the island, men were hammering at something, and the wet sod of Larrigan was carrying the sound like a telephone wire.

Bill glanced over toward the tower, where Larrigan was lifting her lighted lantern above the shoals. The man's pulses quickened at the sight of it flashing there in the dark.

The keeper of Larrigan might have forgotten the faith—a Judas of the lights who had turned his hand against the service, but no act of his could dim the glory of those lonely beacons of the sea.

CHAPTER IV

A FIGHT FOR LIGHT

HANK TUTTLE took his lantern and returned to the tower. The assistant followed him. There was something special going on down there to-night.

As he approached the tower the sound of voices came to him. Lifting himself cautiously, he peeped in at the window of the watch room. The next minute he had dropped back out of sight.

Two rough-looking men were in there with Hank, and they were up to something.

Bill Drake lay there and listened to the talk, while the wind scurried through the rustling grass, and up above him the light beams of Larrigan twisted their endless march in the dark.

The men in the watch room talked—a last minute brushing up of plans that already had been agreed upon.

At first their discussion revealed nothing to the man outside. Then bit by bit he pieced the thing together. When at last Bill Drake crawled away from the tower, the mystery of Larrigan was a mystery no longer.

Hank Tuttle had grown tired of working for wages, and had thrown in his lot with a gang of coast pirates, and they were going to wreck the Jap silk ship *Moso Maru* to-night.

A false beacon had been rigged up at the old, abandoned light tower, and just as the silk ship was changing her course to stand in past Larrigan Island they would switch lights on her, and pile her up on the sand bar, where the wreckers would be waiting to loot her of her rich cargo.

A slow but accumulating hate crept into the assistant's heart as he crouched out there in the dark. Hank Tuttle was going to strike his treacherous blow

under cover of the lights. Like a coward he intended to hide behind his uniform after it was over.

The missing assistants were being held as prisoners at the abandoned tower. It was their hammering at the stone walls of their dungeon, which Bill had heard earlier in the evening.

Hank Tuttle intended to keep his skirts clean of the business. He would tell how he had been attacked by the raiders and overcome, before they put Larrigan lighthouse out of commission. The next morning he would trail them to the old tower, discover the imprisoned assistants, and liberate them.

The fighting mate swore to himself. It was a wonderful scheme Hank Tuttle had cooked up, a scheme that was fool proof, and all that—but this time it wasn't going to work.

Bill Drake had been sent down there *for the good of the service,* and human lives didn't weigh anything in the balance when the lights were in danger. Larrigan was going to burn to-night, or somebody was going to die with their boots on.

Hank Tuttle came to the door with the station glasses in his hand. He lifted them to his eyes, and stood staring off across the water, where the lights of a steamer showed through the surf haze.

"It's the *Maru* all right," he said as he handed the glasses to one of the wreckers. "You boys want to be careful, and don't give me the signal till you see her start to swing in on her new course. Then they won't notice that anything is wrong."

The two wreckers stamped off into the night, and Hank Tuttle returned to the watch room The assistant inched his way toward the building. As soon as the gangsters were out of hearing, he was going in and settle things with the crooked keeper of Larrigan.

Lifting himself beside the wall, he peeped in at the window. Hank was standing at the foot of the stairs, and he was listening. Some suspicious sound had caught the guilty ears of the lighthouse Judas. His hand was at his hip, where something bulged within his pocket.

The next minute there was the sound of feet on the iron stairs. Hank was going up to the lantern.

Kicking off his shoes, Bill Drake entered the watch room and crept over to the stairs. The clank of climbing feet came down to him from the dark heights of the tower, but there was no sound from the man who followed stealthily behind.

The assistant reached the service room and peeped up into the lantern. The upper chamber was empty, and the door leading to the outside balcony was open. The keeper had gone out to have another look at *Moso Maru,* steaming in with her cargo of oriental silk, and shaping her course by the angle of Larrigan's blinking light.

Bill Drake crept up into the lantern. The man on the balcony turned and saw him, and grabbed for his gun.

The assistant leaped for the door. Hank Tuttle fired at him through the plate-glass window of the lantern.

There was a splintering of glass, and the rattle of fragments on the iron decking, but the bullet missed its mark.

Before he could fire again the deep-water man was upon him.

Bill Drake had fought more than one battle at sea, where the fate of his ship depended upon the strength of his good right arm. This man who struggled with him out there on the slippery balcony of Larrigan's light was not a mutinous sailor. It was a powerful man who was goaded to the point of madness by the fear of failure and discovery. And it was the super-human strength of a maniac that had suddenly filled his iron-thewed body.

The assistant tried to crowd into closer quarters, but driving blows sent

him back against the rail. Again and again he clutched at the frenzied keeper, but Hank Tuttle always tore himself free, and always he was searching for the pistol he had dropped in that first desperate rush.

Around and around the circular balcony they fought their ruthless battle of the heights. Like blinding search lights the beams of the revolving lenses kept flashing into their faces, then passing on, left them to grapple in the semi-darkness again.

Bill Drake plunged headlong at his enemy. From the first he had been fighting an offensive battle, and Hank Tuttle had been putting his blows where they would count the most.

Already the eyes of the deep-water man were beginning to close under the endless hammering. He knew that it would be only a matter of minutes now until he would be blinded, and Larrigan would be at the mercy of the treacherous light keeper.

The thought spurred him on into a reckless attempt to bring the fight to close quarters.

Hank Tuttle caught him in arms that suddenly seemed to possess the strength of steel. The assistant was lifted from his feet and hurled against the rail. For a minute his helpless body dangled there, while the keeper struggled to heave him from the tower, to the black depths below.

Bill Drake was groggy from the fight, and the tide of battle had suddenly gone against him. But he was a sailor from the deep-water fleet, where men hang by a lurching rope, and fight it out with the storms in the lofty blackness of the tall-sparred ships.

One hand caught at the railing, and closed in a grip that only death could loosen. Desperately Hank Tuttle yanked and heaved in an effort to fling him from the balcony. But in this he was unsuccessful.

The assistant righted himself, and once more closed with his man. There was no thought of creed or codes now. It was a battle to the death, and one of them must go. Like a blind gladiator he braced himself against the railing, and heaved upward.

The next minute he was alone upon the balcony. A wailing cry went calling down the night, and something thudded to the ground below.

With groping hands Bill Drake felt his way towards the door of the lantern. Already there was the heavy tramping of feet on the iron stairs, where the wreckers, attracted by the pistol-shot, were coming to finish the job Hank Tuttle had started.

Larrigan's light was still burning, but Bill Drake blinded by battle, saw only a faint glimmer through his bruised and swollen lids.

He stumbled down to the service room, caught up a wrench from the tool rack, and feeling his way along the wall, stepped out upon the stairs. The next minute he had closed the door behind him, shutting out the light that filtered down from the lantern. This must be a battle in the dark for the wreckers, even as it was for him.

Larrigan was still burning—and Larrigan was going to continue to burn at all odds.

There was a rush of feet on the iron stairs beneath him, and Bill Drake measured the distance with his ears.

The next minute he swung the heavy wrench downward.

A blurted cry ended half-formed in a human throat, as one of the wreckers plunged over the hand rail, and went hurtling down through the black spaces of the hollow tower.

With a snarling oath the other gangster flung himself upon the blinded assistant, who barred the way to the lantern.

Bill Drake knew that the odds were against him, odds that were too great to be overcome. An hour ago he would

have matched his strength against any man, and hoped for victory. But blinded and dizzy from the fight, he was but the shadow of his former self.

He knew that he was beaten. The battle would not be his. But Larrigan was still burning—and Larrigan was going to burn through the night.

Other men had died beside their lights—and asked no questions.

Bill Drake leaped straight down the stairs, taking the wrecker with him in his fall. He felt the giddy, twisting flight as they plunged down the clattering iron steps—then the blackness of oblivion engulfed him.

When Bill Drake crept back to the land of life and reason, he felt the motionless body of the wrecker beneath him. He passed a questioning hand across the man's face, and knew that never again would he ply his treacherous trade on the sea coasts of this world.

The eyes of the assistant were still closed and useless, but he turned an ear upward and listened.

He heard the soft drone of the clock work turning in the tower above him, and the swishing pur of the big oil-vapor lamp.

Bill Drake smiled softly to himself. Larrigan light was still burning.

A SIX-GALLON HAT

THE cowboy wore a big, broad-brimmed hat for very sensible and sound reasons—not just because it was picturesque. The wide brim protected his face from the fierce rays of the sun, and shaded his eyes always. In rainy weather, the hat was an umbrella.

By bending the brim, one could scoop up water, and so the hat was also a drinking cup. When the temperature went down to zero and below, the wide brim was pulled down and tied over the ears. It was just as good as ear muffs.

Every camp fire that was started in the open was fanned into flame by sweeps of the cowboy's big hat. It took the place, therefore, of bellows. And when one wanted to put out a fire, what was better than a big hat in which so much water could be carried? So it extinguished fires as well.

When one cowboy wished to signal to another at a distance, the big hat was waved, swung to the right or left or above the head. It could easily be seen. If a man was tired, he used his hat as a pillow, or shoved it between himself and the hard ground.

Added to all these admirable qualities, the cowboy's "war bonnet" was likewise comfortable. Is it any wonder he wore a big hat?

An African Adventure Story

Drums of the Kwilu

By H. M. Sutherland

(A COMPLETE NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

TOO MUCH TSETSE!

MASPOTOS, the emaciated old witch doctor of the Smoking Mountains and one of the most powerful figures in the Central Congo country, had a grievance to air. His face showed it. So did his steps. He drew slowly near the thatched hut of the great Juju.

In his heart he was tremblingly afraid of this strange white man who could do such supernatural things. Once Maspotos had seen the Juju remove eggs—many, many eggs—from the hair, nose, and mouth of a Bambalan youth, until the boy had fled howling with terror into the jungle.

For this reason he approached with palpable reluctance the kraal in front of which the Juju sat, half dozing in the shade of a striped awning and fanned by a Kikuyu boy. When he had reached a point some fifteen yards distant, Maspotos halted and raised his hand in a sign of peace.

The Juju frowned and stared at his visitor intently, wondering what had brought him there in the hottest hour of the day.

At the same instant the Juju's adviser and general factotum, a *muri* whose facial cicatrices pronounced him a member of the Kwilu's highest caste and closely related to the chief, appeared in the doorway and leaned against the wall of the hut.

Maspotos, taking new courage, advanced to the edge of the awning and bowed low before the Juju. Then, straightening, he began to talk in a thick guttural. Not a word of this did the Juju understand. He pretended, however, that he was following every word. He knew that it would never do to let the old witch doctor know that he could not understand the Pelele dialect. That would undermine his prestige and destroy his position as chief prophet of the Moloki. So he heard the speech through without an interruption, save to nod and grunt as he thought occasion demanded.

The *muri*, an unusually intelligent

Bambalan, proud of his European dress consisting of dingy ducks and a shirt that had seen better days, came forward and took his position beside the Juju. He must have understood the situation, because in a guarded tone he came to the rescue of the white man.

"Him say you make tsetse fly go 'way —no come back," he translated hesitatingly. "Cattle die—people all starve. Basoko men, Bapinji, Mobunda—all say tsetse fly must go. Juju can do."

The *muri's* knowledge of English was limited and of recent origin. It was, however, unusually fluent, considering the short length of time he had been associated with the white men. Less than three months previously he had met the Juju and McGinnis, the ivory trader, and had guided them into the Kwilu country.

There the Juju had succeeded in establishing himself as the messenger of the Moloki, thus insuring the safety of the whites at least for the time being.

The Juju, until this expedition into the headwaters of the Congo, had been a wandering magician along the coast towns of East Africa. He had seen more varied adventures in odd corners of the world in his thirty-one years than ordinarily come in the lifetime of a wanderer.

He was rapidly growing aware of the exceedingly precarious position he and "Ivory" McGinnis were occupying. The approach of the old witch doctor, and his following of cannibals, who made no attempt to keep that practice a secret, caused a slight tremor to stir the roots of the American's hair.

Back in Toledo, Ohio, U. S. A., the Juju was known as Aristide Roosevelt Smith. The coast towns of Africa knew him as "Lal Shikor," the great Hindoo wizard. The Ninety-seventh Serial Squadron in France had called him the "Flyin' Fool."

Through feats of legerdemain and trickery, Smith had frightened the Bambalans into complete submission and gained for himself the name "Juju." In more than one Congo dialect this word meant "the missionary's devil." In addition to winning this name, he and McGinnis had obtained absolute control over the richest ivory field in existence.

For three weeks Ivory McGinnis had been in Boma, near the mouth of the Congo, arranging for storage and shipment of their cache from that port to the world markets. The Juju had remained behind to maintain the friendly relations with Moto Zop, his Bambalans, and the adjacent tribes of the Kwilu.

More than once during this time, Aristide Roosevelt Smith had realized that he was sitting on a tin of restless T N T. His control over the blacks, openly cannibalistic, lay entirely in their superstitious awe and fear of his magical powers.

Palpably the arrival and complaint of the old witch doctor was not a trivial matter to be ignored or even lightly considered. Maspotos was held in almost as high esteem and as deep fear as was the Juju. If the upriver tribes had sent him to the Juju to talk about the dread tsetse, which was rapidly thinning the country of the cattle, obviously it was up to the Juju to do something.

But what? If only McGinnis could be present! He would know how to meet the emergency, for no man ever trekked the Congo who knew more of the customs and habits of the natives, or better understood the vagaries of the African mind.

McGinnis would not return for another week, however. The Juju would have to depend upon his own resources. And he must find a way out of the difficulty without jeopardizing their control over the Bambalans.

He scratched his head thoughtfully, then grinned. He realized that such a gesture was not in keeping with the dignity of his position as messenger di-

rect from the Moloki, the god of the Congo. Finally he turned to the *muri*.

"Tell him that the Moloki is angry with him and his people because—they don't take a bath. No—hold up! That won't do. Tell him that the Moloki is punishing his children with the tsetse fly because they would have killed the Juju and the other white men when they first came to the Kwilu. Tell him that I'll plead with the Moloki to take away the tsetse, but that I'm afraid it will take some time. The Moloki is awful angry."

The *muri* translated this in a few words. The message seemed to bring great relief to Maspotos. Eagerly the witch doctor replied. and the *muri* turned to Smith, the hint of laughter in his eyes.

"Him say do now," he declared.

"Do what?"

"Beg Moloki make tsetse go."

"All right!"

The Juju came to his feet and made a few cabalistic gestures and signs, trying to think of something appropriate to say. Then with a perfectly straight face he murmured:

"Eeny, meeny, miney mo,
Catch a nigger by the toe,
If he hollers let him go;
Eeny, meeny, miney, mo."

To all appearances this gave complete satisfaction, for Maspotos bowed in deep obeisance. Then he turned to leave, but apparently thought of something he had forgotten. He wheeled about and said something to the *muri*. The native grew tense in every muscle. An expression of haunting fear flared in his eyes.

"What is it?" demanded the Juju apprehensively.

"Him say he talk with the 'Black—Rhino,'" replied the *muri* in a guarded tone. "Black Rhino say Juju no can make tsetse go. Maspotos go tell him Juju can do."

"And who is this Black Rhino?"

"Him *bwana* Basoko men. Him give many *kissi*. Maspotos fear him—all men fear Black Rhino."

This was news to the Juju. It brought a new element into the situation, one which he and McGinnis had failed to take into consideration. This Black Rhino sounded as if he might become a dangerous factor. Strange that he had never heard anything of him from McGinnis!

"Is this Black Rhino in cahoots with old 'Mashed Potatoes?'"

The *muri's* impassive face remained blank.

"I mean does Maspotos help the Black Rhino?"

The *muri* nodded. "Him stay with Maspotos—eat Maspotos' food."

"Where does the Black Rhino live?" asked Smith, watching the departure of Maspotos, whose lively step belied his aging appearance.

"Him come to-day—go to-morrow." The *muri* shrugged. "Hunt ivory—trade people. Him no talk where go. Basoko men follow him—him live with Basoko men some time. Black Rhino bring trouble," he concluded, with an air of assurance that brooked no questioning.

"So?" mused the Juju. "Nice little pair of pals—a combination that will prove hard to beat. I wish McGinnis would show up. Looks like we're slated for some fireworks, and I'm not selfish enough to want to enjoy them all by myself."

"*Bwana* McGinnis come to-morrow," announced the *muri*, gazing down in the direction of the silent, silt-discolored river.

"How do you know that?" demanded the Juju sharply.

"*N'dowa.*"

"Um! That hollow-log radio set," Smith grunted, with a half frown. "I want you to show me how that thing works. You birds were sending wireless messages along the Kwilu here when my ancestors were chucking coconuts at

each other. Sometimes I wonder which of us is the heathen."

CHAPTER II.

ROUGE ET NOIRE.

SHORTLY before noon on the following day, and true to the *muri's* prediction, McGinnis' return was announced by the vociferous barking of the mangy mongrels and a general stir throughout the village. Women, children, and warriors mingled in a joyous welcome to the *Bwana* and his paddlers.

The Juju stood waiting back on the bank until the crush was over. Under an awning in the center of the large dugout canoe sat *Bwana* McGinnis. At his side, watching the performance on the shore with an expression of gay animation, was a slip of a girl beneath whose helmet glinted the coppery tints of a boyish bob.

"Good heavens!" gasped the Juju. "As if we didn't have enough trouble without bringing a red-headed woman into the game!"

Almost with the force of a physical blow came a premonition of danger, a prescience which could be engendered only in the depths of enigmatical Africa —the *n'dowa* of the blacks. And paramount in that premonition loomed the menacing figure of the Black Rhino and his weird, powerful ally, Maspotos, the witch doctor of the Smoking Mountains.

"Rouge et noire!" Smith murmured softly. "It's a gamble, but my money's on the red!"

The canoe grounded. Every one in reach gave a hand to the unloading. Like children each one laughed and shouted as he staggered up the steep bank under a heavy burden.

Their welcome to McGinnis was genuine. They stared at the girl with him in a manner that brought a gurgle of irrepressible laughter. Some of the more curious of the men drew close as if to touch her and find out if she was real.

The Juju went forward to meet them. McGinnis spoke a few words to her while they were still out of earshot in the general clamor. She glanced up and met Smith's gaze with frank interest and pleasure.

"This is Pat, my little girl," McGinnis was explaining. "Meet the Juju, alias Aristide Roosevelt Smith, Pat." A smile crinkled the corners of McGinnis' eyes.

"Dad has been telling me many things about you," she declared, shaking hands warmly. "Sorry I missed that show when you first came in here."

The sparkling vividness of her and the frank, boyish manner with which she greeted him took the American's breath. For the first time in years he felt the diffidence of a schoolboy.

The depths of blue in her eyes seemed to carry an ever-present threat of laughter and mockery. Yet there was a sincerity in her expression that gave promise of a wholesome and lasting friendship—something of the loyalty of her father battling with an inordinate love of fun.

"Your dad has been strangely silent about you." Smith at last found his tongue. "I didn't know you existed in real life."

"You're nice," she said impulsively, stepping between him and her father and drawing them close when some of the repellent, cicatriced Ngombes crowded near. Clutching an arm of either man, she moved back toward the village.

"I think—I'll get accustomed to those men—some time, but just now——"

"These birds here are carbon copies of Greek gods as compared with the Lip-plug Basokans, farther up the river," volunteered Smith. "You want to see those boys. They look like a cross between delirium tremens and a nightmare. By the way, McGinnis," he continued a bit more seriously, "old Mashed Potatoes was down to see us yesterday."

"What did he want?" McGinnis was interested.

"Asked me to shoo the tsetse flies out of the country before they killed all the cattle."

McGinnis chuckled dryly. "Such is fame! You have a pip of a position, Smith. They think you can do anything. What did you tell him?"

"I told him that I'd talk with the Moloki about it, but that the Moloki was mad and that they could not expect any results for quite a while. I was stalling for time."

"Good! There's nothing else to be done in the face of the tsetse. Maspotos must have been stirred up a bit to come down out of the mountains."

"He was. Said that the Black Rhino was back again and that the tribes farther up the river were worried about their cattle."

"Did he say that—the Black Rhino was back?" Into McGinnis' tones crept a sudden note of fear and perturbation.

Smith nodded somberly. He was on the point of asking a few questions about this Black Rhino, but he reconsidered and remained silent. Perhaps it would be best if the girl did not know the real truth.

The startled expression on McGinnis' face told Smith that the presence of the Black Rhino was a threat, that his arrival was going to have a sinister influence. McGinnis was iron-nerved, and he knew Africa. If McGinnis was afraid of the Black Rhino, then there was sufficient cause for fear.

"What's all this, dad?" broke in the girl curiously. "Who are these men—Mashed Potatoes, the Black Rhino, and the Moloki? You never mentioned them."

"The Moloki is a god. The Black Rhino is a devil. And Maspotos is a combination of both," explained McGinnis shortly. "We'll tell you all about them some other time. Here's your hut, Pat."

They halted before a thatched shelter adjoining their own kraal.

The girl gazed at it skeptically. "Will it keep out the rain, dad?"

"It's as tight as a drum. We've been keeping supplies in it, but I'm having them moved over to the Juju's stage."

He pointed across toward a raised platform, covered with a tarpaulin, some twenty or thirty yards away. She looked at it and apparently remembered the story her father had been telling her about Smith's magic.

"When is the next performance?" she demanded of Smith. "I'd like to see you do some of those tricks dad has been talking of."

"We may have one soon," he laughed, but the glance that passed between the two men was expressive and it silenced her.

After lunch, eaten under the awning of the main tent, McGinnis and Smith went out to supervise the removal of the supplies from the hut to the covered stage. They left the girl asleep in a mosquito-proof hammock. The heat grew almost unbearable. By common consent they moved over to the shade of a mangrove and sat down.

"I'm wondering," mused Smith thoughtfully, "if you did the right thing by bringing her out here." He nodded in the direction of the sleeping girl.

"I know that it was a mistake, but what can a man do?" McGinnis shrugged expressively. "As you have probably noticed, Patricia has a mind of her own. I really didn't fetch her out—she came in spite of my protests."

"She would." The Juju grinned appreciatively.

" 'Twas like this," continued McGinnis. "She has been in school in Cape Town ever since her mother died, and she usually spends her vacations back home in England—with my people. This year I had planned to take a vacation myself and join her on her visit.

"But this business came up and I

couldn't afford to take a chance on permitting this ivory field to slip through our fingers. So I cabled her from Boma, telling her to take the next steamer north.

"Her reply reached me twenty-four hours later, saying that she had engaged passage and was sailing in one hour—for Boma. Knowing that by the time I got the message she was already at sea, there was nothing to do but wait for her.

"I tried to persuade her to take the next boat out when she arrived, but she begged so hard to come with me that I couldn't refuse. But I was a fool, and I really knew better than to bring her, but—I haven't been with her much since she was a little tyke, and I've never learned how to say 'no' to her."

Smith deftly rolled a cigarette and struck a match on his finger nail. After a deep inhale or so, during which he watched the porters carry the huge boxes of supplies as if they were made of cork, he relaxed against the bole of the tree.

"Well, unless something unusual breaks, she will be as safe here as she would be on the Strand. Except for the fact that these birds' diet is not exactly along orthodox lines, I'd trust 'em as far as I would my neighbors at home."

McGinnis sat up straight. Grim lines settled about his mouth, lines which Smith had seen more than once and which were barometers of the trader's most intense emotions.

"Just what did Maspotos say relative to the Black Rhino?" he demanded, in a harsh tone.

"When the gist of what he told the *muri* was translated to me, it sounded something like this: The Black Rhino had told Maspotos that the Juju could not make the tsetse fly disappear. The old witch doctor evidently believed I could do it. He said he was going back to the Black Rhino and tell him that I had promised to shoo 'em out.

"That was about all, but I gathered that several of the tribes had been instrumental in having Maspotos come in and make his complaint. I've a hunch that the Black Rhino is behind it all. I asked the *muri* what sort of a bozo this Black Rhino is, but that boy got cold feet, and wouldn't talk. He did leave the impression that this Rhino was a bad egg and as dangerous as a hungry leopard."

"And the *muri* is right," agreed McGinnis with a nod.

"I had a hunch that something was in the wind when Maspotos with his retinue of lip pluggers popped in with their complaint," Smith went on. "According to him, the Bapinji and Mobunda tribes are back of him, as well as the Basokans. Do you think they have been stirred up by this Black Rhino?"

"No question about that." McGinnis' hands closed about his knee so tightly that the knuckles showed white through the tanned skin. "The Pelele warriors have undoubtedly told him about that ivory cache. Of course he will make a try for it. That much is certain, and it appears that he has already made his first move."

"But who and what is this Black Rhino?" Smith asked sharply. "Looks like the two of us ought to be able to handle him."

"Hardly." McGinnis' smile was thin-lipped and grim. "If he was merely a man we might, but he's more than just a dangerous man. You'd have to understand Africa and its strange peculiarities, its fatalistic attitude toward life and death, and its superstitious fears, and even its gods before you'd fully understand my meaning.

"Perhaps I can give you an inkling of what I mean," he went on, "by telling you that the Black Rhino is wanted in Pretoria for one of the most heinous crimes ever committed.

"The details are too repugnant to re-

peat. That gives you an idea of his character.

"To that let me add that he knows Africa better than any living man. He exercises an influence over the Ngombe tribesmen and Kaffirs farther south which causes them to do his bidding unquestioningly.

"You probably would say that 'he had their goat.' We of Africa explain it by saying that he seems to possess clairvoyant powers—the *n'dowa*—and he works a hocus-pocus on the ignorant native by giving a powerful *kissi*."

The blank expression on Smith's face brought further explanation.

"The *kissi*," continued McGinnis, "is a charm or medicine which he forces any one he desires to take. He makes the one who takes it believe that if he disobeys an order or command of the Rhino, he will die on the instant. To make this convincing he has more than once resorted to poison. You can readily see how they fear him."

"But what sort of a devil is he? I mean what nationality?"

"Half-caste—mixture of many breeds. He is a giant in stature, a Negroid in appearance, but with enough white in him to make him absorb all of the vices of his many sources of origin, and none of the virtues. In other words, he is without fear, conscience, or sense of right and wrong."

"Whew!" gasped Smith. "He must have been raised in Chicago."

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK RHINO.

AFTER an uneventful night the fears of the previous evening faded into thin air, at least as far as Juju Smith was concerned. He awoke with a feeling of boyish exuberance which was new to him. For a moment he lay staring at the thatched roof, trying to find the cause of this sensation.

Then came the realization that his buoyancy arose from the presence of a red-headed slip of a girl whose blue eyes were continually laughing and whose infectious smiles had played havoc with his intentions of paying attention strictly to the business at hand.

"Why, heavens!" he ejaculated, sitting up. "I ought to be immune by this time. It's just that I haven't seen one of her kind in so long that she's a novelty. Besides, I've no more use for a wife than a sand flea has for a business education."

Nevertheless he shaved with painstaking care and dressed in immaculate linens, before appearing at breakfast under the awning of the main tent. A few minutes after the Kikuyu boy had served his coffee, Patricia came out of her kraal and stretched her lithe young arms luxuriously.

On seeing him she smiled and waved gayly. He got awkwardly to his feet and bowed to her. Invariably she made him feel like a gawky kid. This fact nettled him slightly. When she sat down at the table, however, her effervescent spirits and sparkling vivacity quickly put him at ease.

"When I saw how late it was," she told him, "I imagined that you and dad had eaten hours ago."

"We usually do. Your father has been at work since dawn unpacking those supplies he brought in with him yesterday. He always eats by the light of the lantern."

"And you waited for me? That's awful nice of you." For an instant there was mockery in her eyes, but it quickly vanished. "But I want to be a help to you and dad—not a burden."

He started to protest, but she looked at him in a manner that made him realize that his reply would have been inane.

"Oh, I know that everything is not quite as serene and pleasant as it seems," she continued. "You and dad are both rotten actors."

"Thanks!" He bowed ironically.

"I forgot you were in that profession," she apologized with a quick smile. "But I meant you can't hide your real feelings. You were worried yesterday about this—Black Rhino and the others."

"Just plain imagination," he assured her, with a confidence he was far from feeling.

She shook her head sharply. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come," she declared, after a slight pause. "Dad tried to get me to go back to Cape Town, but I love this." Her arm swept out toward the mountains to the south in a comprehensive gesture. "I want to see where you get the ivory and how you live out here.

"The mystery of the jungle—this strange, enigmatical thing you call Africa—has caught dad," she continued. "He can't leave it. I think I've inherited my love of it. I'm going to help you in spite of your objections, and I believe that I can make myself useful if you give me the chance. Oh, I wish I were a man!" she added wistfully.

With a grin he raised his cup to his lips. "Great progress has been made in that direction during the last few years," he declared gravely.

"Stop it! I won't be laughed at." Her quickly mounting anger was dissipated almost as quickly as it came. She smiled and glanced in the direction of the stage on the other side of the camp.

Smith's eyes followed her gaze and with a convulsive start he grew rigid in his chair.

McGinnis was coming obliquely toward them. Approaching from the jungle trail, a score or more of upriver natives appeared, headed by old Maspotos and a giant figure whom Smith instinctively knew to be the Black Rhino. His stature, his broad shoulders, his long, dangling, powerful arms, and his civilized attire could belong to none other than the Basokan menace.

Evidently it was his intention to bring things to a climax as quickly as possible. Smith shot a hurried glance in the direction of the river, a vague plan of flight forming in his mind.

A glance at the Rhino's following was sufficient to tell Smith that they were lip-plug Basokans. So evil and sinister was their appearance that with difficulty he repressed an ejaculation of repugnance.

Each of the warriors carried a sharp-pointed assagai and a skin shield, oval in shape, with the hide covering cured in such a manner that it would turn the steel barb of a spear. Previous experience with these people had taught the whites that they were a tribe of fighters, fierce and ruthless, and that they made no pretense of keeping their cannibalism a secret.

McGinnis was hurrying toward the awning as fast as possible, without too much show of speed. Just behind him came two of his Bambalan porters, carrying something which for a moment puzzled Smith. Then the American's eyes brightened. He chuckled, for it was a machine gun of the type he had used through the late conflict in France. Let him get his hands on that and he could wipe out the Rhino's retinue with a single burst of fire!

"Who are they?" asked Pat in a low tone at his shoulder.

For the moment Smith had forgotten her presence. "The Basokan Rotary Club down for their regular Thursday luncheon," he told her easily.

Her reproachful glance dropped from his eyes to his tensed hand. He was gripping the butt of his automatic at his hip. Instinctively he realized that she knew something of the meaning of that visit. His facetiousness vanished.

"What's the matter with their faces?" she inquired.

Her voice was as steady as if she were witnessing a police parade. She was clear courage. He felt a thrill of admiration for her exhibition of the

same sort of iron nerves Ivory McGinnis showed in an emergency.

"They put wooden plugs or disks in their lips to make—knot holes, I suppose you'd call 'em," he explained, and she laughed outright. "I'll tell you all I know about them later. In the meantime, perhaps it'd be best if those birds didn't see you. Slip back inside until after the powwow. You can peep if you like."

"If you think best," she agreed quietly, and moved back out of his sight.

A few seconds later McGinnis stepped in under the awning. The two porters placed the machine gun and tripod beside him.

"Know anything about this gun, Smith?" demanded McGinnis, almost casually. "I don't seem to be able to get the hang of it."

"Ought to. It's a Monteith of antiquated make. I cussed one for a year or so in France. Where'd you get this baby?"

"Picked it up in Boma last week. Put it together as quick as you can and stand by. If the Black Rhino is looking for trouble——"

"It'll be the asbestos curtain for that minstrel show!" declared Smith with a grin.

In ten seconds he had the gun mounted. Then he clamped on an ammunition drum. With a sigh of relief he swung the muzzle about until the sights were centered on the advancing figure of the Black Rhino.

For an instant the impulse to touch the trigger and obliterate the nearing menace was almost too much to resist. Only the fear of arousing the religious frenzy of the Moloki worshipers stayed his hand. To fire into them would be certain to drop Maspotos, the prophet of the Moloki.

"All set, Mac!" he whispered. "Say the word, and in ten seconds it will be time to set 'em up in the other alley."

"We'll palaver with 'em a bit." McGinnis glanced apprehensively toward the door of the hut behind them.

"She promised to stay inside," Smith declared.

"Good!"

Each knew that the other understood there might be danger in the Black Rhino's seeing Patricia. Yet neither gave expression to that fear. But the realization brought a keen prickle to Smith's finger tips as they nestled about the trigger. It would be a real pleasure to turn that staccato muzzle on the broad, arrogant target now less than twenty feet distant.

The party came to a halt a few paces from the awning. The Black Rhino advanced almost to its shadows before raising his hand in a salute expressive of friendly intentions. His coarse, tanned features, his thick lips, and his heavy, loose jowls gave him the appearance of an animal, fierce, gluttonous and capable of berserk action on a moment's notice.

Indeed, there was something about him—perhaps it was the general impression of brute power—that bore a striking resemblance to the deadly beast for which he had been named—the horned rhinoceros.

"Is it war or peace?" demanded the Rhino, with an expressive glance at the machine gun.

He spoke excellent English. In spite of his arrogant, bold attitude, there was a hint of Oriental politeness in his manner. In fact, some of his features were undeniably Mongolian, particularly his eyes and forehead.

"That depends," replied McGinnis, making no move to greet his visitor with the customary handshake. "To what do we owe the honor of this visit?" His politeness was exaggerated.

"Merely a warning," replied the Rhino blandly. "The Basokans here and some of the other upriver tribes seem to hold you and the Juju"—nod-

ding toward Simth—"responsible for the tsetse pest, which appears to be spreading fast in this section. I felt it my duty to come and tell you this. We whites must stick together."

"That's a bit too raw," broke in Smith angrily. "I'll stand for most anything but that. If I wasn't afraid of insulting those gargoyle cannibals behind you, I'd say you belonged to their class."

McGinnis frowned.

The Rhino's saturnine face hardened. "As you please!" He bowed ironically. "I have sought to hold the Basokan warriors in check," he continued evenly to McGinnis, "but they are getting beyond my control. If you will take my advice, you will trek out of the Kwilu at the earliest possible moment."

"That's a threat, I take it." McGinnis folded his arms across his chest, as if in an effort to curb his rising anger.

"If you think to bluff us out," cut in Smith, the irrepressible, "you're riding to a fall. You want this ivory field and this is the little loud speaker which says you can't have it."

Smith touched the gun menacingly. "I'm having quite a little debate with myself on whether or not I shall turn this thing loose. The affirmative is just about to win a unanimous decision. Each minute you stay here is another argument in favor of it."

Into the Rhino's face crept a fleeting expression of fear. His vaunted nerve wavered. There was no doubting the fact that Smith meant just what he said. For an instant the slightest overture on the part of any of the actors in that bit of tense drama would have brought on the livid play of violence.

Into this dangerous breach the girl stepped and moved swiftly to her father's side. The Black Rhino apparently forgot the very presence of Smith and the machine gun. The mounting fear and anger faded from his face. In their stead came a fawning, solicitous expression in which was mingled a gleam of crafty cunning and treachery.

"I feared you would take that stand, McGinnis," the Black Rhino declared in an apologetic tone. "It would have made matters more simple if you had decided to leave. Since you are determined to stay, I shall do all in my power to hold the Basokans under control. I think I can promise safety for a fortnight, but if they become dangerous, I will try to get warning to you."

Each of the two white men saw through his sudden change of front, coming on the instant of Patricia's arrival under the awning, but not for worlds would they have permitted her to know. The Rhino was fascinated by her freshness and vivid beauty.

Catching her eye, Smith beckoned her to his side.

"Ever see one of these?" He jerked his thumb toward the gun.

She shook her head negatively.

"It's a machine gun. We're going to give these birds a demonstration of how it works," he explained. "When I give you the signal, you press this gadget here. We're going to have our visitors believing like I do—that you are a being from another world."

He swung the gun about and leveled it on a sandspit across the river. It was literally covered with a swarm of sleeping crocodiles. A squint at the sights, and Smith nodded at Patricia.

The vicious, crashing roar of a single burst of fire—probably a hundred shots—startled the village into an uproar. Smith, unheeding, calmly sprayed the sandspit with deadly havoc. Some six or eight of the crocodiles scuttled for the river. The remainder, at least a score, wriggled and writhed and then lay still.

The demonstration was impressive. Into the bewildered stares of Maspotos and his Pelele followers came both fear and awe. They were on the verge of a panic-stricken flight. It was plain that

they looked upon the girl as a supernatural visitor.

"Good work!" The Black Rhino smiled in a way in which he showed that he appreciated Smith's strategy.

With a stiff salute the huge figure turned and strode away. Maspotos and his Pelele retinue followed, seemingly anxious to get away from that immediate vicinity with all possible dispatch.

Smith stared after them all for a full minute without speaking. Then he pivoted the gun about until it covered the retreating Rhino and his men.

"I'll bet you twenty pounds," he offered to McGinnis, "that I can drill my initials in him without touching the lips of a single one of those other palookas. Is it a go?"

McGinnis shook his head with a queer smile. "When you've lived in Africa as long as I have," he replied slowly, "you'll realize that there is one law of the native which must be obeyed. It is inexorable. When a man comes on a friendly mission, his life is safe even in the village of his most deadly enemies."

"That's the trouble of being in an uncivilized country," replied Smith, with a crooked grin. "If we had that bird back in a highly enlightened country like mine, we could shoot him—in the parlor—and go on the vaudeville stage."

CHAPTER IV.

THE CRATER OF IVORY.

AFTER dinner that evening, McGinnis, Patricia, and Smith remained outside the tent in the coolness of the twilight. They watched the mysterious shadows of the gathering darkness and listened to the strange, mystic sounds of the jungle. After a time their talk grew spasmodic and monosyllabic, and then died almost completely.

Each was thinking of the Black Rhino and his veiled threats. Yet none of them cared to give expression to his thoughts.

The somber depths of darkness in the distance seemed to be filled with the formless and unknown fears which dominated the Congo tribes. It was weird, unreal, and brought a feeling of helplessness to them.

The metallic, clashing buzz of a myriad of insects, the shrill, harsh call of the night birds, and above all the chilling wail of the hyrax, had silenced them. Smith was vainly trying to think of something to relieve the tension, when Patricia broke the stillness.

"Tell me about this ivory field you have found," she begged, with a laugh, which betrayed her nervousness. "If you don't talk, I'll go crazy listening for something. And I haven't the slightest idea what it is I'm listening for."

"That something is Africa," replied McGinnis thoughtfully. "It's the fear of the unknown, the unexpected. It soon teaches us always to be on the alert. And in time one learns to love its very dangers."

"Oh, let's talk of 'shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings,'" suggested Smith, lighting a cigarette.

"And ivory," persisted Pat.

McGinnis filled his pipe and struck a match, his face glowing vaguely in the flaring light. For a score of years he had hunted elephants for the sake of their tusks. He knew more about those giant mammoths and their strange instincts and habits than had ever been told.

This much Smith had gathered from sporadic conversations with the trader. It was palpable that elephant hunting came first with McGinnis always. The spoor would quicken his interest no matter what he happened to be doing.

"I think I told you as we came up the river," he began at last, "of the wonderful field of ivory we had located back here on the headwaters of the Kwilu, and that it would take us at least five years to exhaust it. The cache is some fifteen kilometers from here, back in the Smoking Mountains to the

south. There is a reason why it has not been exploited long before this.

"The Smoking Mountains are of volcanic origin. There are many hot springs and geysers among them now. For this reason the natives hold this section in superstitious fear and awe, believing it to be the abode of the evil spirit, the Moloki.

"Naturally they have not guided any white men into this section. Old Maspotos is the Moloki's chief priest. He holds his mysterious ceremonies somewhere back there, not far from our ivory cache.

"This ivory field, however, is and has always been the dream of every tusk trader on the Congo—the El Dorado of the jungle. The elephants are the strangest and at the same time the most intelligent animals I have ever known. I could tell you some uncanny things I have seen with my own eyes, but which were hard to believe even then.

"One of the most unusual characteristics of the elephant is the fact that when the chill of death clutches him, he disappears. No man knows where he goes to spend his last hours. He has a secret hiding place where he goes to breathe his last.

"Traders have known this for a hundred years. A number of them have spent their lives trying to find the death field of the tuskers, knowing full well that its discovery would bring riches beyond their dreams.

"A few skeletons have been discovered from time to time, but always upon investigation it has been proved that the elephant had been slain by the natives. Never have the hunters been able to locate the bones of a single elephant which died a natural death.

"After some twenty years in the Congo," McGinnis went on, "I had at last come to the conclusion that this death field was a myth. Some three months ago, though, Smith and I found this cache. It is nothing more than the crater of an extinct volcano and is literally carpeted with tusks of the finest ivory I have ever seen.

"For decades old elephants have made their last pilgrimage across the Smoking Hills to the dark, dank fastnesses of that crater, there to pass their last moments in complete solitude. It is instinct that takes them with unerring *chumfo* to that place. It is a force so strong that they are unable to resist it. Nothing can stop one when he starts on that pilgrimage. It is destiny.

"And like all Africa, these things are elemental, all powerful, and the remainder of the world takes them for granted unquestioningly. Inexorable laws of nature govern life here and make a mockery of ambition, sentiment, and convention."

For a full minute a deep silence followed his recital. Smith was deeply impressed by the graphic painting of jungle life, and was loath to break the spell McGinnis had woven.

"Goodness!" Patricia relaxed her tense body and leaned back against the wall. "I've imagined all sorts of things about this country, but that is the most amazing thing I've ever heard. You'll have to take me to that place, dad, at the first possible chance."

"We're going there early in the morning," announced McGinnis unexpectedly.

"Why the hurry?" the American asked.

Smith knew that McGinnis had sensed danger in the very presence of the Black Rhino. He was unable to understand this sudden decision.

"And you'll take me, dad?" asked Patricia eagerly.

"Of course. But it's a quick trek, Pat—in to-morrow and out on the following day. Then we're heading down the river for Boma. I've been talking with the Consolidated Trade people, Smith, and they will pay us a fancy price for our secret.

"They've asked for an accurate estimate of the cache. We're to collect all the tusks on a plot a hundred meters square and estimate the size of the crater.

"On this they will base their offer. In view of the difficulties and risks, I'm thinking 'twould be sensible to sell our knowledge of the stuff. They will be able to handle the situation far better than we, because they can put an army in here overnight."

"I'm the dummy in this rubber," replied Smith. "You're playing the game for both of us. But without being too inquisitive, how much will the Consolidated people be willing to give?"

"We won't take less than two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Pounds?" Smith sat up straight in his chair. "A cool million dollars! Do you think they'll pay that on our estimate?"

"Naturally."

"That sounds like they already have a corner on ivory."

Evidently the Consolidated Trade people knew McGinnis and placed implicit faith in his word.

The trader arose and knocked the ashes from his pipe. From the distance came the faint, lonely wail of the hyrax, sounding like the plaintive cry of a lost soul wandering in the Stygian darkness of Gehenna. Then the jungle was magically stilled by the rumbling roar of a hungry lion.

"We start at daybreak," declared McGinnis, "and we'd best turn in for rest."

He disappeared inside the hut. A moment later Smith accompanied Patricia to her own kraal. The mysticism of the Kwilu night had enthralled them, enmeshed them in its myriad moods, and they were silent. Unconsciously their hands clung for an instant as he bade her good night.

The kaleidoscopic play of the vividly colored dawn was illuminating the hills on the east as they breakfasted in the glare of an acetylene lantern. Then the start was made with two score Bambalan porters under charge of the *muri* to bring in the tusks from the hundred-meter plot. Few supplies were taken, save the tents, bedding, and bare necessities. Smith, however, insisted that the machine gun be included and won his point.

Without incident they traversed the bush on the left bank of the river throughout the morning, heading south in the general direction of the Smoking Mountains. Late in the afternoon they topped a swell overlooking an apparently endless veldt and paused to gaze at the distant panorama.

It was a paradise for big-game hunters. In the middle distance grazed herds of "Tommies," zebras, Steinbok. Far off on the right was a small herd of elephants which brought the light of interest and excitement to McGinnis' eyes.

Off to the left and not more than two kilometers distant loomed the Smoking Mountains, a mist-shrouded chain of sharply serrated and abruptly rising elevations. The nearest of these hills had apparently been a volcanic cone at one time. Through a gigantic explosion the cap had been blown off, leaving a low crater, the crest of which arose not more than a thousand feet from the plains. Its lower slopes were covered with dense vegetation. The upper reaches were for the most part bare and studded with cliffs and precipices seemingly insurmountable.

"Inside the crater," explained Smith to Patricia, "is the Mecca of the elephant. Once when we were in there, one old boy charged us with his last breath. It was magnificent."

She nodded understandingly but said nothing. The place seemed to hold her in enthralled silence. There was something about her and McGinnis that was strangely similar, something in their

very attitude which made them "belong" to the jungle.

To McGinnis that ivory field was the materialization of a will-o'-the-wisp dream he had followed for years, the culmination of the ivory hunter's endeavor. To her it must have been the innate lure of the far places—the unknown.

At sunset they were crossing the crest of the crater. Patricia caught her first glimpse of the elephant death field. To Smith it had never lost any of the charm and fascination it had held for him from the beginning, for there *was* something weird and supernatural about the place, or at least there seemed to be, although he knew that this must exist largely in his imagination.

The dense thickets of canes and creepers and the groves of palms almost hid from view a small lake in the center of the crater. But the lake, the miniature jungle, the thinning slopes inside the shell were more than just a part of landscape. They were enigmas, curtains behind which were hidden the secrets of the dark continent, mysteries which defied the white man's explanation.

Here and there as the party dropped down toward the lake were the scattered skeletons of elephants, some of them comparatively fresh and others almost buried in the dirt and mold. The farther they advanced the more numerous these were, until they literally covered the ground.

Beside the lake they hurriedly pitched camp. A great fire was started, more to dispel the gloom than to dissipate any chill in the air. During the hour while dinner was being prepared Smith and McGinnis staked off a representative plot of ground, approximately a hundred meters square and then sought to count the tusks on it. At last they gave it up.

"Several hundred—six at least—not counting those buried under the surface," estimated Smith. "This is one place you can mine the stuff."

"Not half of it is in sight," agreed McGinnis. "We'll take out about thirty choice pieces to bind the bargain."

After the evening meal they gathered about the fire, for a damp chill seemed to sweep in from the lake. After a bit McGinnis and the *muri* drew apart from the others and stood staring upward toward the crest of the hill, silent, expectant, listening.

More than once Smith caught himself straining his ears for the echo of something through the harsh, shrill medley of the birds and scaly-throated insects which filled the hollow of the crater. He, as well as the porters near by, sensed some intangible threat. Whether it was real or just a premonition that tensed them, Smith was unable to determine.

McGinnis' masked expression changed slowly. At first it was merely curious, then suspicious, and at last there came a fleeting betrayal of fear. Smith, noticing these changes, glanced backward and located his machine gun.

"What's up?" he queried of McGinnis in a guarded tone, so that Patricia could not hear.

The trader shook his head warningly. He and the *muri* conversed for several seconds in the Bambalan dialect. Then the *muri* nodded and melted silently into the darkness. McGinnis strode out among the porters and talked with them long and earnestly, apparently in an effort to quiet their fears. When he returned, he gave Smith a warning glance which effectively silenced the questions he would have asked.

At last the *muri* came back. His every action and movement after he entered the circle of firelight was an added proof of the approach of the thing they feared. His face showed suppressed excitement. His eyes reminded Smith of those of a hunted animal at bay.

The *muri* went straight to McGinnis. His first words brought the trader to his feet with a smothered ejaculation.

He heard the *muri* through, then he turned to Smith.

"The Black Rhino and Maspotos have made a quick move," McGinnis whispered, so that the dreaming Patricia could not overhear. "In some manner they have aroused the entire Kwilu—the Pelele, the Bapinji, and Heaven knows how many others. The toms are beating them to a religious frenzy. It was the toms I've been hearing for an hour, but I wasn't certain.

"The *muri* says they are coming in closer about us, either spreading a net for us, or making plans to rush us here to-night. We've played right into the Rhino's hands by coming out here. I should have known better, but I didn't think he could get the Ngombes together so quickly. This sort of business usually takes time."

"So that's what I heard!" Smith shot a quick glance at the girl. "Well, what's the program?"

"First thing is to locate a safe position. We'd be completely at their mercy here." The trader was silent for an instant. "Perhaps the best thing to do is to find a ledge or cave back up near the crest where there can be only one approach. Then we can mount the gun and wait for daylight."

"She might as well know." Smith nodded toward Patricia.

McGinnis nodded gloomily. "Break camp!" he ordered succinctly, and strode toward her.

CHAPTER V.

DRUMS IN DARKNESS.

UNDER the guidance of the *muri* they retraced their steps out of the basin toward the upper slopes, exercising every care and precaution known to the jungle threader. It was a slow and difficult process for, under McGinnis' strict order, the only lights used were his and Smith's electric torches and these only sparingly.

In the gap, worn smooth by the feet of thousands of weakening elephants, they halted. Smith, when the beat of the distant toms struck his ears, felt a distinct chill course the length of his spine.

From a dozen different points, in almost as many directions, and apparently not more than a kilometer distant, came the monotonous, ominous beat of the tom-toms. Over on the right, near what must have been the Kwilu, the light of a great fire glowed. It illuminated a wide arc in the sky, while a number of vague, dim glimmers were visible in other sections of the jungle. These lights, together with the drumming of the toms, showed that retreat to the village that night was a physical impossibility, and smothered Smith's desire for flight.

The *muri,* at McGinnis' suggestion, disappeared in the darkness on the right of the gap, and returned in less than ten minutes with his report. There was a niche in the wall of precipices overlooking the approach from the outside, surrounded on three sides by sheer walls.

A narrow defile, impossible to be scaled, lay directly in front. It was in the form of a shallow cave, reached by a precarious path along the ledge leading out from the gap.

From the *muri's* description, it would be a comparatively safe retreat. This much McGinnis translated. Then the entire party followed the *muri* around the face of the basalt precipice.

On reaching the cave which the *muri* had located, they found it sufficiently large to accommodate every one with comfort. With the experience of years in the Congo, McGinnis took advantage of every protection the position offered. Under his direction the porters swiftly raised a low barricade across the mouth of the opening. Behind this, Smith mounted his machine gun.

For the next quarter of an hour he tested the mechanism, assuring himself that each part was in perfect working

order. Through all of this the steady, menacing throb of the toms continued, slow and measured, like the knell of deep-toned iron bells. Periodically the beats increased to a crescendo of frenzy, evidently designed to stir the Ngombe warriors to the point of madness when they would do the bidding of the Rhino unquestioningly. Then after a short silence, the steady throb would again echo through the impenetrable night.

The beat of the drums seemed to have aroused the night life of the jungle to an ecstasy of riotous excitement. At irregular intervals came the angry rumble of the aroused lion, and the rasping cough of the dread leopard. And through it all, like the wailing bagpipes in the roar of zero hour on the battle front—a minor chord of shivering terror—the hyrax lamented from every covert down the slopes.

Patricia drew near Smith. Her face was vaguely outlined in the glow of his torch. She was frightened, but it was plainly apparent that she was not going to betray that fact by a word.

"What is it that makes that horrible, wailing cry?" she asked in a whisper.

"That's a special number by the Jungle Orchestra called the 'Rock Rabbit Blues,'" he told her lightly. "With a drum corps accompaniment," he added.

"Do you mean to tell me that a rabbit makes that sound?"

"I do. By the way, you once told me you'd like to see me give a magical performance." His hand dropped gently to the machine gun. "The stage is now set for a spectacle which has never before been accomplished.

"With the aid of this magic wand," he went on, patting the gun, "I'm going to change that Alabam' Drum Corps into speed-record jack rabbits, just as soon as they appear on the scene. I don't like the motif of their music."

"It gives one the creeps," admitted Pat, with a shiver. "Aren't they getting closer all the time?"

"No," said McGinnis, who had drawn near. "The Ngombe takes time for anything. Besides, it will take half the night to perform the auguries. We needn't expect a visit from them until moonrise."

"What time is that?" queried Smith.

"About three o'clock."

"How about a break through now?"

"Impossible. The jungle trek at night is not done. Besides, there's a Pelele watching every trail."

Patricia's grimace and smothered ejaculation of repugnance showed that she remembered the lip-plug visitors of the previous day.

The Bambalan porters were frightened out of their wits, and made no effort to keep that fact hidden. Huddled in one corner of the cavern, they chattered ceaselessly and peered into the darkness outside as if they expected each instant to bring the attacking hordes.

Their one idea was flight. They knew that the Black Rhino wanted the three whites only, but that it would mean death to all if they did not escape before the Pelele charge.

No attempt was made to sleep that night. Through the long vigil Smith, McGinnis, and Patricia sat beside the gun, straining every sense in an effort to penetrate the blanket of darkness that enshrouded them. As the hours passed and there came no change in the monotonous beat of the toms, the proof of McGinnis' statement regarding the delay of the attack until moonrise or later became apparent. He knew the African mind, and the Ngombe customs.

At last the moon flooded the landscape with a vague, silvery shimmer of uncertain light.

Smith heaved a sigh of relief. "Now let 'em come!" he breathed.

The throbbing toms took on a new note, an increase in tempo until the night fairly reverberated with the sound. Instead of the slow, measured beat, it now grew to a continuous roll of distant

thunder which seemed to be drawing imperceptibly nearer.

Once more Smith looked to the mechanism of his gun and saw to it that the ammunition drum was feeding perfectly. If the natives came, they must expose themselves on the slopes down in front. He felt that he could hold off the horde indefinitely, or as long as the ammunition lasted anyway, and that with a havoc that would throw enough fear and terror into them to insure peace forever.

Then, with alarming abruptness, the toms ceased. With this cessation every other sound of the jungle died. The unnatural silence seemed to be the herald of approaching danger. It seemed as if all nature was listening in fear and breathlessness.

As the minutes passed and the tense anxiety of the three whites increased, Smith felt that it would be a relief for the black swarm to break into view down below. Several times he thought he saw moving objects in the distance. Each time he swung the gun in that direction, but nothing came of them.

"It will soon be dawn," whispered McGinnis at his side. "Half an hour more ought to see us through."

"Do you think they'll wait for daylight?" demanded Smith hopefully.

"There's nothing certain in this country," replied the trader with a shrug. "Still, the chances are in favor of that. These Ngombes aren't particularly fond of the darkness. That's why they built those fires to-night. I've an idea they'll spread out and close in on us after daybreak. It may be that we'll have a good chance to break through for the river then."

"What's your plan?" Smith was wondering if McGinnis' expressed hope was not meant merely as an encouragement for Patricia.

"I've been talking with the *muri*," replied McGinnis. "He and I have come to the conclusion that it will be best to make a break for it and then head for Boma as quickly as possible."

"How about shooting our way out with this?" Smith's confidence was rising.

"Then it'll be up to you and the *muri* to carry the gun. The porters are going to leave us at the first chance."

In the dawn they slipped out of the niche and back through the gap, before the light was strong enough to betray them to any possible sentinels in the jungle. Then with all speed they plunged down the slope and succeeded in gaining the protection of the bush, apparently without being discovered.

In the silent shadows they crept with a distinct sense of elation. The Bambalan porters set a pace which the whites found exceedingly difficult to maintain.

Despite the protests and pleas of McGinnis and the *muri*, the porters increased their pace to a run and disappeared into the depths of the jungle, intent only on getting away from the presence of that silent, closing menace.

The quartet had not advanced a kilometer into the jungle when a sudden and portentous sound brought them to a startled halt. A short distance behind them, somewhere near the trail, a tom-tom broke the stillness.

Almost immediately it was answered by another out to the right and somewhat farther distant. Other drums resounded from almost every direction, until it seemed that the fugitives were completely surrounded by the roll of the alarm.

"They've discovered that we're heading out," muttered McGinnis, discarding his heavy pack and thrusting a few bars of chocolate in his pockets. Then, searching in the pack, he removed his entire supply of cartridges, and made ready for the flight.

With extreme caution and yet with every possible effort to lend speed to their retreat, they hurried in the direction of the river. A few hundred yards

along the trail they came upon the small packs of supplies with which the porters had been burdened. The beating toms had sent them into headlong flight.

Half an hour later they reached the banks of the river. On the well-defined trail to the Bambalan village they managed to make better progress. From the sounds in the jungle behind them it appeared that the Ngombe warriors, urged on by the never-ceasing dirge of toms, were closing in upon the fugitives in a fan-shaped manner, converging upon the river.

Everything depended upon speed. McGinnis and Smith realized this, with the result that they labored at a pace which began to tell on them before they had made a kilometer.

Quite suddenly a new element broke into the swift performance of events, one which for the moment bewildered Smith. A hollow, deep-toned reverberation seemed to come out of the very river a few yards away. From somewhere far down the river there came a faint echo of this sound. Smith halted and motioned to the *muri* to bring the tripod. McGinnis paid no attention to it, but seemed glad of the breathing spell the halt gave him.

"N'dowa," grunted the *muri.*

Understanding broke on Smith. He grinned and picked up the gun.

"But what is this—*n'dowa?*" asked Pat.

"It's a hollow-log radio system," explained Smith. "One end of hollowed logs are thrust into the river at regular intervals, and they beat on the other end with clubs. The signals can be picked up at the next log miles away. Wonder what's the latest on the Congo wireless?"

The *muri* stood motionless for several seconds, listening with rapt attention. Smith, realizing that he was reading the message, grew silent and waited. At last the booming sound ceased. The *muri* relaxed.

"Bapinji chief tell Black *Faru* three hondred men come upriver—meet Juju one hour. Black *Faru* say catch Bwana McGinnis' Juju, but no hurt girl. Maspotos make sacred cirele of fire for white devils—tsetse fly all go."

"Sketchy, but graphic—burnt offerings and all that!" Smith was trying to be facetious and was not very successful in the attempt.

"Trapped!" was the trader's verdict. "The Bapinjis have us headed off from below, and the Pelele above."

"Let's throw a surprise into 'em," suggested the Juju grimly. "What do you say to going back after the Black Rhino and his gang and take 'em unawares?"

The light of battle kindled in McGinnis' eyes, but a glance at the girl dulled them with fear for her. "Perhaps we can break through to the south," he said uncertainly.

At that instant the *muri* crouched and peered through the canebrakes back along the trail. His very attitude bespoke imminent danger, and Smith's hand went instinctively to his automatic, for he knew that he would not have time to mount the machine gun.

"What is it?" asked Smith.

The *muri's* reply was a single word: "Pelele."

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE BAOBAB.

McGINNIS and Smith made ready for instant action, expecting each instant to bring a flood of Ngombe warriors through the bush. For a space of several seconds they stood motionless, waiting.

Out of the tail of his eye Smith saw that Patricia had taken a position alongside them and that she would give an excellent account of herself with her small but effective automatic. She was meeting the emergency with the gameness and courage of her father, but not with the calm nonchalance, for her lips

were parted and a hectic flush touched her cheeks.

"Make for that baobab tree over there!" ordered McGinnis in staccato.

Smith and the *muri* caught up the machine gun and headed for the giant bole which offered their only possible protection. McGinnis, with Patricia in front of him, brought up the rear in that hundred-meter dash.

Evidently the Pelele whom the *muri* had seen had been a lone scout, for the bush gave no indication of the presence of others. Undoubtedly this picket had made a hurried return to the Black Rhino to report what he had seen.

It was only a matter of minutes until the entire force of Ngombes would be upon them. The *n'dowa* back on the river began its signaling anew. The toms broke out with sudden fervor which heralded the approach of the frenzied climax toward which the hours had been moving.

"The Rhino is working the Basokans to the point of attack with those damned toms," whispered the trader to Smith, as they came to a halt at the roots of the baobab. He cast an anxious glance back toward the river trail. "We can expect them in a very few minutes now."

"Give me time to rig up this gun," promised Smith grimly, "and they'll wish their grandmothers had died maiden aunts."

With the aid of McGinnis he mounted the gun on the tripod, back in a partly protected recess among the roots of the baobab. Like all of those giants of the Congo the tree was really a group of trunks, welded together at the roots into a veritable labyrinth. Half hidden in its intricacies, they awaited the attack.

Smith, having assured himself that the gun was in working order, trained the barrel on the open space before their position across which the attackers must necessarily charge. McGinnis clambered to a slight elevation on the roots. From this position he was able to fire through an aperture between two large branches. Patricia drew back into the depths of the recess behind the gun. The *muri* took his stand just in front of her with the evident intention of defending her to the last.

A feel of warm admiration for the *muri* swept over Smith. The Bambalan was as loyal as they came. Because Smith and McGinnis had befriended him some three months earlier he now stood ready to sacrifice his life in a vain effort to repay them. He, apparently, had realized that the girl was the white men's chief care. He made a shield of his body for her.

Trying to see into the thicket of cane at the edge of the bush, Smith was unaware of Patricia's approach until she stood at his side, and had placed a hand on his shoulder. He shot a glance up at her. The expression on her face brought a wince of pain to him.

"You and dad have tried to keep the truth from me all along," she said with the hint of a tremor in her voice. "But I think I told you that you were both poor actors. I've known the truth since last night, and I want you to be frank with me."

"Don't you worry! We'll come through this all to the merry." He was somewhat surprised at the confidence in his tones.

Her hand caught his and clung to it tenaciously.

"I want you to make one promise," she pleaded. "When you see that there is no chance, will you save one of your last—bullets for me? Promise—please! I'd rather it—would be that way."

Smith stared at her, unable to understand how she was able to speak so calmly.

"Will you promise?" The plea in her eyes was not to be denied.

"Yes." His lips came together in a thin line. "But I'll also promise something else. If the Black Rhino exposes

himself for the merest fraction of a second, he'll never bother us again."

The tattoo of a tom not a hundred meters distant silenced them for a moment. Smith's fingers grew tense on the trigger. For some thirty seconds the drum echoed wildly, then grew still.

"That's the Rhino's call to mass his forces," warned McGinnis from his perch above. "Keep your eye on the canebrake. They're just beyond that."

Again the signaling on the *n'dowa* broke out, sounding in the ears of the fugitives like the beat of a dirge. The *muri* was listening. Smith waited until the message ended.

"What's the news?" he asked.

"Say white devils no get 'way. Black *Faru* know hiding place—t'ousand Ngombes fix trap." He waved his arms in a gesture so eloquent that Smith could almost see the black cordon of frenzied Basokans crawling in upon them. "Bapinji—Mobunda men come soon. All come mebbe ten minute—big fight."

Smith relaxed slightly. "Good!" he ejaculated. "That gives us a few more minutes to get ready. I say, take a look behind us and see if there's a way of their coming in on us through these roots." With the aid of gestures he conveyed his meaning to the *muri*.

The native eased his way back through the low branches with the stealth and noiseless movement of a python.

Smith, without easing up on his vigilance, caught Patricia's arm and drew her down behind the gun.

"Please stay here," he begged. "Shoot over my shoulder when they show up. Have you any extra clips?"

"Three."

"Keep them where you can get at them. Those birds are going to know there's been a scrap anyway."

His fingers closed about her hand convulsively. Suddenly he found himself saying things he had intended that she should never know. But in the face of their great danger, conventionalities were forgotten. Only the elemental things could have a place there. He caught her close to him fiercely.

"I love you, Pat," he whispered. "It won't hurt to tell you that now, and somehow I want you to know before—the deluge. You've been wonderful through all this, and just when I find out how much life—with you—could mean, this happens. I've been dreaming for the last two days, Pat, and those dreams have been glorious things. I wish that this was a nightmare and that we could wake up."

"Don't, boy," she whispered, dropping her head on his shoulder with a sigh. "Don't make it any harder to face than it is."

The implied admission sent a surge of happiness through him. Regardless of the dreaded menace before them and the sudden outburst of toms which announced the arrival of the downriver tribes, he kissed her.

They forgot the presence of danger, the threat of death—then Smith put her from him gently. Across the open space at the edge of the cane he caught the lurking shadow of a black warrior.

With the celerity and accuracy gained in air combat in France he swung the gun on the spot and pressed the trigger, spraying the brake with a score of shots. A single cry echoed from the shadows. As if in reply came the yell of the Basokans, a shout of savage frenzy that sent a chill through Smith.

Almost as if by magic the jungle seemed to be literally alive with the lurking figures, crawling close into the opening and making ready for the assault. Then came the deafening din of a hundred toms. A wave of leaping Basokans raced through the brake and dashed forward, each man trying to protect himself with his ineffective cowhide shield, and brandishing his assagai.

Smith jerked the gun up and brought the muzzle straight into the face of the

charging wave. The steel hail poured into them. For an instant the Basokans halted, hesitated, then wavered in the face of that galling fire. One more burst sent them scurrying for cover, howling in fright and dismay.

The toms increased their din. Hundreds of throats took up the cry of the Basokans. Above all could be heard the angry roar of the Black Rhino, exhorting in berserk rage his followers to make a new attack. His shouts and pleas apparently had little effect. For the moment it seemed as if all his efforts would be futile.

"If he'll only lead the next charge!" Smith's wish was almost a prayer.

The Black Rhino, however, was too wary for that, as was Maspotos, if the witch doctor were present at all. Deep back under cover of the impenetrable thickets they remained, urging the blacks to overwhelm the white devils, but careful not to get within range of that deadly machine gun. At last there came a calm. Smith realized that it presaged the second attack.

"Look out!" cried McGinnis. "They are coming ag'in."

For a split second this charge dismayed Smith, for it seemed that the sweeping horde was numberless. In another instant they would smother the defenders. His first burst of fire failed to have any effect whatever. Again he pressed the trigger. The withering hail choked the path of the advance for an instant.

Everything hinged on the next second. Smith pivoted the gun for a sweeping spray across the whole front. In the midst of the arc the gun went dead. With a gasp Smith realized that the antiquated machine gun had jammed. Frantically his fingers sought the drum. He wrenched at the breech, but it resisted his every effort.

Instead of wasting more time, he reached for his automatic. A veritable wall of leaping blacks fell upon him, pinning him to the ground with such force that for an instant he was stunned and helpless.

Patricia's smothered cry galvanized him to action then. He succeeded in drawing his gun and firing twice before he was clubbed into insensibility. With his last conscious effort he clawed at the black, glistening bodies, trying to make his way to her.

CHAPTER VII.

GODS OF THE CONGO.

WITH returning consciousness Smith struggled to a sitting posture with his back to the tree. He tried to clear his blurring vision. For several seconds everything swam before his eyes.

Then, with increasing distinctness, he began to comprehend the meaning of the movement about him. His first thought was of Patricia. He surged upward in an effort to gain his feet, only to realize that he was trussed and helpless.

Through the tangle of milling savages he finally saw her, standing with her back to the baobab in an unmistakably defiant attitude. She was facing the Black Rhino who was advancing toward her, a gloating leer on his face. The very expression of the Rhino caused Smith to writhe and twist in a superhuman effort to free himself of the thongs about his wrists and ankles. McGinnis and the *muri* were not in sight.

At a word from the Rhino the warriors withdrew several paces. Then it was that Smith discovered McGinnis near Patricia's feet, his hands and legs securely bound. The abrasions on his head and the tattered condition of his clothing told of the terrific struggle he had put up before being overcome.

For an instant Smith wondered why both of them had not been slain outright. What was it the *muri* had said about "the sacred circle of fire?" Were they to be offered as a sacrifice to the Moloki?

The thongs about Smith's feet at last gave way under his violent efforts. He lurched erect and went straight to Patricia. Her cry of joy brought him to her side in three strides.

"I—I thought you were killed," she gasped, her eyes widening with concern when she saw the contusions on the side of his head.

"I'm still in the game," he said almost flippantly, determined that the grinning Black Rhino should never know the fear that gripped his heart. "Keep a stiff upper lip," he added in a lower tone. "If you get a chance, cut these thongs about my wrists. I've one play up my sleeve which they have overlooked. It'll account for the Black Rhino anyway."

McGinnis tried to sit up, but his bonds would not permit it. He sank back with a groan. In an instant Patricia was beside him and had raised his head.

"I'm not hurt," the trader assured her. "They've trussed me up like a roast pig. What happened to the gun, Smith?"

"Jammed as they always seem to do in a pinch. What do you think will be the next move of this—minstrel show?"

McGinnis shrugged. A fleeting expression of hopelessness crossed his face.

"I've a hunch we're down on the cards as a burnt offering to the Moloki," continued Smith with a forced grin. "At least that is what I've gathered, but I'm also playing a hunch that we're going to live long enough to make chocolate pudding out of that grinning ape for the Moloki's dessert if it's the——"

He was interrupted by the approach of old Maspotos. With the witch doctor were several of the most hideous of the Pelele tribesmen, evidently the priests and attendants in the weird, strange worship of the spirits of the Smoking Mountains.

At a word from Maspotos, the Basokans loosed the bonds about McGinnis' feet and jerked him erect. Then, completely surrounded by a picked guard of lip-plug warriors, they made ready for the march into the land of the Pelele.

Patricia's step, as she maintained the comparatively slow pace of the march, was certain and firm. Smith, with a throb of pain, realized the fight she was waging with her fears to keep her poise.

She had never before faced danger, had never even been forced to undergo hardships, and yet she was exhibiting a fearless courage which was unsurpassed even by the indomitable trader. With a thrill of admiration and love he drew close to her.

"Atta girl!" he applauded. "You've more nerve than I ever expected to see in a woman. We'll show these devils a few tricks yet.

"I'm wondering what became of the *muri,*" he said to McGinnis, a few minutes later, when Patricia was out of earshot. "I heard him shooting when the fighting started, but I didn't see anything of him after that."

"I don't know," replied the trader despondently, "but I'm placing all my hopes in his having escaped. 'Tisn't much he can do, even if he did get away, but it's our only chance. He might have been killed."

"Do you know anything about this Moloki worship?" asked Smith, changing the subject abruptly.

"Almost nothing—but we'll know more by to-morrow."

As occasion offered Smith exerted every atom of his strength trying to break or stretch the rawhide thongs on his wrists, so that he could slip his hands through, but the Basokans who had tied those knots were experienced. At last Smith was forced to desist.

Early in the afternoon they passed the point on the river trail where they had turned at right angles for the ivory cache. Without hesitation the long line of blacks swung off in a southerly direction, straight into the heart of the

Smoking Mountains. Hour after hour they marched through the grueling heat, until Smith began to watch Patricia closely.

Her indomitable will could not carry her through such a trying, toilsome experience. Muscles not hardened to the trail could not stand the strain. An expression of utter dejection had settled about the corners of her mouth, but her face and the manner in which she carried her head mirrored stubborn defiance.

At last they halted near the base of one of the highest peaks in the entire range of hills. Ngombes and other tribesmen immediately dispersed at the bidding of Maspotos, leaving only the bodyguard, the Black Rhino, and the old witch doctor with the captives.

After a short rest they resumed the march, climbing up a precipitous trail through thinning groves of trees. After an hour they drew near the first line of outcropping cliffs—a jagged, irregular row of precipices above which the vegetation appeared to be exceedingly sparse.

In a small amphitheater, deep back under the overhanging cliffs, they at last came to a halt. The three captives dropped to the ground in complete exhaustion. Kola nuts, forbidden to all save a favored few, were given to Patricia by one of the guards. She fed them to McGinnis and Smith, and also gave them palm wine in a calabash basin.

This done the Basokans paid no further attention to the three whites save to bind Patricia's wrists to prevent her from offering any assistance to the others. Then they began to make preparations for the ceremonies of the night. The Black Rhino sat apart from the others, reclining against a boulder and drinking steadily from a square-faced bottle, palpably impatient for the rites to begin.

The partly sheltered temple of the Moloki was a natural arena which apparently had been leveled by Maspotos and his followers. It was circular and some fifty feet in diameter, flanked on each side by the walls of the cliff. At the rear there was what appeared to be a cavern. Out in front of the amphitheater was an embankment some ten or twelve feet high, upon which the spectators were beginning to gather.

In the mouth of the cavern stood a large, flat stone of basalt. Maspotos used this as a sort of raised dais or platform. Upon it he had erected his altar. Upon this he was building a fire which burned a rich, aromatic odor. On either side of the dais was arranged a row of tom-toms, with their leather drum stretched tightly over short sections of the sago palm from which the pith had been removed.

Gradually the Ngombes who had scattered at the foot of the mountain, evidently to spread the news of the capture and coming ceremonies, began to crowd about the arena. The frenzy to which the toms had aroused them had entirely disappeared.

They seemed fearful, cringing, awe-stricken, crouching on the outer edges of the amphitheater and watching the performance in timorous silence. There was no way of estimating their number in the gathering dusk. Each moment the mob increased, until it seemed that almost every savage on the Kwilu was present.

At a signal from Maspotos, four of the Basokans leaped forward and began beating a rhythmic call on the toms. From the darkness back of the crowded spectators the signal was echoed by a steady tattoo of beats until the night was made hideous with the sound.

Patricia shivered unconsciously. "Even if we do escape," she half whispered, "I'll hear those things for the rest of my life."

When the din had reached its height Maspotos, with two of his aids, brought dry fagots of wood from a recess be-

hind the dais. These were placed in a large circle out in the arena before the altar. Dead grasses and other inflammable material were piled upon this ring of wood.

The old witch doctor then waved his assistants away. At this point the Black Rhino arose and made his way to the platform, where he seated himself upon a block of stone.

Smith watched these proceedings with interest, missing nothing of the details, and determined to take advantage of any opportunity that might be offered. There was a bare possibility of burning those thongs from his wrists when they lighted the circle of wood.

He began to worm his way toward it. Then his eye caught sight of the sharp, steel head of an assagai leaning against the wall. He moved in an almost imperceptible manner toward it.

Suddenly he grew aware of the fact that the Rhino's watchful eye was upon him. Smith halted and gave his entire attention to the actions of Maspotos. A few seconds later he saw a Basokan warrior retrieve the assagai and take it to a place of safety.

Maspotos tossed something on the altar fire which made it burn with a lurid flame. Then he raised his hands above his head and came forward to the edge of the dais. For fully three minutes he spoke in an even, unhurried tone. Smith understood almost none of the harangue. Apparently the witch doctor was speaking in the Basokan dialect.

"What is he saying?" Smith asked McGinnis.

"They're going to submit our fate to the auguries of the pig's liver," explained the trader. "That gives a little more time. Can't you think of something? A bit of your magic might swing the pendulum."

"I'm helpless," admitted Smith, with a shrug of despondency. "In the first place, I can't get my hands loose. In the second place, if I did, I would still be helpless. I can't do my stuff without the paraphernalia—the tricks of the trade."

"But we've got to think of something," protested McGinnis sharply. "And we haven't much time to do it in. It's a certainty that Maspotos will find just what he wants to find in that pig's liver."

"And what'll that be?"

"That the lines diverge and that the Moloki is still angry and will be appeased only by the sacrifice of the foreign devils."

"Thought you didn't know anything about this Moloki worship."

"That's about the limit of my knowledge."

"It's enough—for the first lesson, anyhow."

Their conversation evidently aroused the suspicion of several of the Ngombes near them, so the two whites stopped talking. A few minutes later two of Maspotos' aids appeared, bearing the slain pig which they placed beside the altar.

The skill with which the old witch doctor went about the performance of the augury showed long practice. At last he straightened and spoke in a low tone to the Black Rhino. The evil, leering grin on the latter's face was an unmistakable verdict of death.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEATH HAND.

THE blanket of tropical darkness seemed to press in more closely about the eerie, dimly lighted amphitheater. The flickering torches cast grotesque shadows upon the walls of the cliffs. The continuous beating of the toms added a deeper meaning to the portent of the ceremony. For the first time Smith felt the depths of despair.

He and McGinnis were standing shoulder to shoulder against the wall.

Patricia sat on a boulder near them, her eyes following each move the participants of activity near the platform made. With a concerted movement a score of Basokans swept in upon the two white men. It was the work of an instant to bind their feet and render them powerless to move. Then the blacks stood aside for further orders.

This move snapped the last strand of Patricia's control. She dropped beside McGinnis crying piteously.

"I—I can't stand this," she sobbed. "I can't stand it. What—what are they going to do to you?"

McGinnis made no reply. A shudder shook his frame. It was the beginning of the end. Both of the white men realized it.

Having sacrificed the two white men to appease the wrath of the Moloki, the fate of Patricia was a certainty.

At a word from the Rhino, two of the blacks forcibly removed the girl from her father's side, and thrust her back among the boulders against the wall. There she cowered, quivering, her eyes wide and staring.

Bodily the two sacrifices were caught up and tossed within the circle of fagots. Smith succeeded in turning on his side where he could watch the proceedings, intending to roll close enough to the fire to burn the cords from his wrists if the opportunity offered. If he could only get his hands free for thirty seconds!

Maspotos came down from the dais and cast some of his powders upon the ring of fagots. Then he caught a torch from the hand of one of his attendants and applied it to the combustibles.

The same lurid flame he had kindled on the altar darted swiftly about the ring. A few seconds later the "Sacred Circle of Fire" was mounting waist high about the two captives. Maspotos, crouching upon the platform, began chanting in a monotonous tone. The toms redoubled their din.

A cry went up from the spectators. At the same instant across the barrier of flames a ghastly figure leaped. For an instant Smith stared at it unbelievingly, then, one by one, six others like the first figure plunged through the blaze to his side.

They were Basokans, judging by the huge, protruding lips, but their faces and bodies were smeared with white clay which by the light of the fire gave them a ghostly, chilling appearance. They wore a breech clout and a headgear of some sort, with two cow horns standing out from the forehead. Slowly at first, but with a gradual increase of pace, the seven apparitions danced about the two bound victims inside the Sacred Circle of Fire.

"The Congo Death Dancers," explained McGinnis with a groan.

"They look it," was Smith's comment.

The beating of the toms increased to a frenzied tattoo. The dance became a mad exhibition of amazing leaps and awful contortions. Through it all Maspotos continued his weird chant, but the dancers were noiseless, save for the soft pad of their bare feet upon the floor of the arena.

Their whirling, leaping figures seemed to pace the dance with the height of the blazes, reaching their highest pitch when the flames shot above the level of their heads. As the fire died down they slowed proportionately.

At last there was only a bed of embers remaining. The dancers had thrown themselves flat on the ground around the two victims, completely exhausted.

Maspotos ended his chant and began smearing his own face with soft white clay from a calabash basin. Smith, who was trying to edge closer to the embers of the dying fire, suddenly grew rigid in every muscle. Some one had touched his wrists. A second later that touch was repeated. At the same time there came a soft hiss of warning. Smith

made an effort to twist his face about so that he could see who it was.

"Bwana."

It was the soft voice of the *muri*. For an instant Smith's heart stood still with surprise and intense relief.

"No move—no look!" came the whispered warning. With the words, a knife blade was slipped under the thongs. There was a seemingly endless moment of suspense, then Smith felt the cords drop from his arms. The *muri* had cut the bonds.

But how could the *muri* be there? Of course! Simple! He had known about the dance and had disguised himself accordingly. Probably had to do away with one of the dancers to take his place. It had been quick work!

It was with an effort that Smith resisted the impulse to shout aloud in his relief. At least the Black Rhino was doomed, and who knew what would happen after that? It might be that——

Frantically he opened and closed his hands in an effort to bring back the circulation. They seemed paralyzed, so long had they been bound. At last there came the reassuring, painful tingling in his finger tips, announcing that the desired result was only a matter of seconds.

With slow, imperceptible movements, he edged toward McGinnis and thrust his mouth close to the trader's ear.

"In just thirty seconds," he whispered, "I'm going to plant a bullet straight between the Black Rhino's eyes."

McGinnis' breath came in a gasp. "How?" he asked hoarsely.

"The *muri* is one of the dancers. He has just cut my hands loose. I've a double-barrel derringer up my sleeve, a .41 caliber, which they overlooked when they searched me. It's a trick gun with spring attachments. All I need is a twist of the arm to get it. Maybe in the excitement we can make a getaway."

"At least a chance!" McGinnis' breath was whistling through his teeth in his tense emotion. "Wait till I give the word. I'm going to stake everything on one throw of the dice. It's so damned impossible that I believe it will work."

"Right! Say when, and I'll do the rest."

With a quick, upward lurch McGinnis gained a sitting posture. "Men of Bambala, Bapinji, and Basoko!" he began in stentorian tones, in the Bambalan dialect, which Smith was able to follow most of the time. "Listen to me! You are making a mistake you will regret for the remainder of your lives. You cannot kill the great Juju because the Juju is the messenger of the Moloki."

He jerked his head toward Smith. "The Moloki sent the Juju to help you and you would repay him by slaying the Juju. The Moloki is angry with you for the treatment you have shown the Juju and he has sent the tsetse as a punishment.

"You have permitted the Black Rhino to lead you into trouble," McGinnis went on. "The Black Rhino and Maspotos are false prophets. This, the Juju will prove to you. The Juju will throw off the bonds about his wrists. The Juju's hand is the Hand of Death. He can point that hand at one of you—and you will die. The Moloki is angry and the Moloki demands a life.

"Let him have it, Smith," he rasped.

With the aid of his left hand Smith came swiftly to his haunches and then staggered to his feet. The Black Rhino half arose and stared at the Juju as if he were an apparition. Then he grinned, and his hand dropped to the automatic which swung at his hip.

Smith swayed on uncertain feet for a split second. Then his right arm shot out like a striking serpent. A flash—a deafening roar—and silence settled over the arena.

The Black Rhino recoiled at the explosion. Over his face came a ludicrous

expression of surprise. Then he toppled slowly to the floor of the dais, twitched for an instant, and lay still. Smith's aim had been true.

"You have seen." McGinnis' voice broke the stillness like the report of a shot. "Maspotos also has been a false prophet."

Smith, with the instinct of a true showman, had opened his hand immediately after he had fired, to show the spectators that it was empty. Taking the hint from McGinnis. he jerked his arm about, point-blank at Maspotos. With a screech of fear the old witch doctor leaped from the dais and fled with marvelous agility, considering his age, into the darkness beyond the arena.

It was too much for the Ngombe spectators—this pointing Death Hand—and Maspotos' departure was the signal for a rout that swiftly became a débacle. In less than one minute the three whites and the *muri* were in complete possession of the arena. A deep, unbroken silence told them that the black horde had gone, not to return.

The *muri's* knife slit the thongs which bound the two victims, then they went to Patricia.

"We've won, Pat! We've won!" exulted Smith, with a gladness in his voice that caused it to break.

The next instant she was laughing and crying hysterically in his arms.

"We'd best hurry," warned McGinnis a moment later. "The *muri* has a boat waiting for us on the river."

"That boy didn't forget anything," replied Smith warmly. "I don't know what you're going to think about it, Pat, but the next thing I hug will be the *muri*."

"On the way, though," McGinnis said thoughtfully. "I think it will be safe enough for us to stop and get at least one tusk of ivory to show the Consolidated."

KEEPING TAB ON WHALES

THOUGH whales are possessed of much bulk and usually travel in numbers, man after many years of hunting has never had a systematic method of keeping track of them. There are quite a few points upon which science and seamen, who make the capture of whales their business, are in the dark.

Next spring when the whaling fleet goes out upon its annual voyage the ships will carry numbers of darts attached to which are identification disks. There will be certain whales the seamen will make no attempt to capture. Into these whales, if possible, the darts will be shot. This will not endanger the whale.

It is hoped by this method to be able to ascertain in the future the numbers and wanderings of the watery mammals as well as whether the continuous whaling activities spread over the period of years has caused them to decrease in numbers to any great extent.

As to the wanderings, no doubt, the crews of two fishing boats in the Adriatic Sea will be able to give information. A large whale became entangled in their fishing nets. For four days and three nights the two boats were towed helplessly about before any of their signals of distress were seen. It then took the crews plus eighty men to beach the whale.

Over the Border

By R.S.Slater

CHAPTER I.

A HORSE IN A HUNDRED.

YIP! Yip! Ride 'im cowboy! Whee-e-e!" A medley of raucus yells greeted the late afternoon air, as one of the punchers of the XX Ranch was attempting to break a wild bronc. Within the corral other men of the ranch force stood, shouting encouragement.

The cayuse was acting up in a very stiff-legged manner. His nostrils were wide, red and snorting. His ears were pointed in the direction that does not express friendship for the rider. This horse was mean and didn't care how he showed it.

The puncher made a brave show of waving his Stetson as he clung to this whirling, jolting tornado. It was really just a show, for there was another trick behind the scenes of the horse's mind. The animal had tired of this silly thing on his back. He tried a new twist, followed by a sudden halting of all four feet. The horse sense of the rider disappeared, as did the rider from the horse, landing on the ground in a heap.

The horse snorted in disgust and trotted off to the side of the corral. The riden picked himself up, accompanied by the jeers of his fellow punchers.

Through all this commotion, only one man, around the corral, could have professed ignorance as to what was taking place. Steve Ellis, who sat on the fence of the corral, was resting his chin on his hand and gazing, with heedless eyes, at the golden and red colors of the western horizon.

He looked like a man who had bumped up against some of life's sharp corners.

He did not pay any attention to a youngster who was working away industriously, polishing the flanks of a bright sorrel horse tied to the fence not far from where he was seated.

If the man on the fence was dreaming. the horse polisher was certainly wide awake. Like all good hostlers, he made a low, buzzing noise through his teeth as he plied his brush. Every now and then as he worked up toward the horse's head, he stopped his buzzing to whisper in its ear. The animal listened attentively to every word.

Both the young man and the horse

were well worth looking at. The youth was tall, lithe, and strong, considering his years. He had thrown his hat on the grass, and in the glow of the sunset he was the color of an Apache.

No Indian, however, could have had the impudent turned-up nose or the bright gray eyes that were a part of James Donald McCurdy, only son of Donald McCurdy, "Black Don," proprietor of the XX Ranch and as good a cattleman as the Rio Grande country knew.

The red horse, Rubio, was a cross between a thoroughbred from Kentucky and a Texas cowpony.

"Git onto his nibs on the fence," whispered the youngster to the horse. "Do you know what is the matter with him?"

The horse rubbed his master's shoulder with his soft nose, but did not answer.

"He might look to you like a man of judgment, Rubio," the young fellow went on, "but—take it from me—he's nutty. 'El Escolar' is in love. He's stuck on sis. That's why he's settin' there moonin' like an old cow with a lost calf. But don't misunderstand, Rubio, it's a secret. Don't you dare tell! He might get mad."

The youngster grinned, and for some time chuckled softly as he carefully brushed out the horse's flaming tail.

Jimmy McCurdy had been born on the XX Ranch, and had lived there all his life. His mother had died when he was a baby. Until his sister came back from school at Dallas, old enough to take him in hand, Jimmy ran wild. When he was very young, he came to the conclusion that it did not become the son of his father to spend his time playing with children.

He was always a prime favorite with the cowpunchers, and at the age when most boys are playing marbles and spinning tops he was breaking colts and riding herd.

Jimmy was no hero worshipper. He met the best riders of the Southwest on equal terms. From the time he could remember, he could see nothing remarkable in their feats of horsemanship or their deftness with their ropes.

If a new hand came to the ranch with a new trick, young McCurdy was interested. He would practice it in private until he had mastered it; and then, quite casually, some day he would use it to the surprise of the man who had been his instructor.

It was the spirit of adventure, perhaps, that made young Jimmy seek for his boon companions people whom other people neglected or disapproved of. One day, when he was a very little boy, a sad figure came limping down the trail. The child was greatly excited over the remarkable sight of a man on foot.

Such a sight he had seldom seen.

Ben Hawkins, the wanderer, found a haven and a home at the XX Ranch. In Uncle Ben, who some people hinted was not quite bright, Jimmy discovered a philosopher whom he made his counselor and friend.

No one objected to Jimmy's friendship with Uncle Ben, but it was a different matter when he began to spend much of his time with José Mabello. He was an evil-looking fellow, who spoke no English, and had little to say in Spanish, being fairly entitled to his nickname of "El Callado"—the silent.

The evil-faced Mexican and Jimmy McCurdy became inseparable companions. His father's warning, his sister's entreaties and the jests of the cowboys did not keep the lad away from the grim Mexican. Finally, Black Don—simply to break up this companionship—discharged El Callado. Jimmy, with grave face, watched his friend ride slowly away down the trail that led to the Rio Grande, for Jimmy knew the dangers that lay ahead of the silent one down that river trail.

Then, Steve Ellis appeared. Jimmy

McCurdy soon counted him as the best friend he had ever had. He did not forget El Callado, however.

CHAPTER II.

EL CALLADO'S CACHE.

THE youngster stopped working on the red horse's coat. He walked down to where the tall man sat on the corral fence, then climbed up and seated himself beside him.

Neither spoke for a time.

Finally Jimmy said: "Say, *capitan* would——"

Jimmy McCurdy was always finding new Spanish names for Steve Ellis, but he could never find one that suited him. He called him El Escolar because he realized that he was the first educated man he had ever known.

"Cut out that *capitan* stuff, Jimmy. Steve is good enough for me."

"I get you, Steve," grinned the youngster, and then he was silent.

After a time Ellis asked: "What were you going to say, Jim?"

"I was just wondering whether or not you would like to have a whole lot of money."

"What do you mean?"

Ignoring the question, Jimmy was again silent for a time, and then asked suddenly: "What kind of a word is the word 'cache?' "

"It's a French word, and means hiding place."

"Oh, I know what it means. So it's French. That is why El Callado did not know what I meant when I used it." Then he turned on the man suddenly and exclaimed:

"Steve Ellis, I want you to go with me to find El Callado's cache."

"What?"

"Sit still and listen," went on young McCurdy, his eyes afire. "When he was here every one said that El Callado was tough. All right, he is tough. He is tougher than dad or any of the rest of them thinks he is. He was too tough for Villa. He was too tough for Mexico, and he had to beat it across the river.

"I would like to know what became of him. Bill Peters says he got shot three days after he left here, but Bill always knows a whole lot of things that ain't so. Well, if he is alive and could get to his cache, he would be a rich man. Now, what I am getting at is this —I know where this stuff is buried; dinero and gold and diamonds and all sorts of things, and you and I are going after it."

The two sat together on the corral fence for a long time. Eagerly, but not excitedly, Jimmy told his story of robbers' gold.

"You see, El Callado wanted me to go after it with him. He had tried three times to get it himself and each time picked up a piece of lead. He figured that I could dress up like a greaser and get through all right, but there were too many people watching for him in that part of the country. I figured that if I did get away, he would meet me and slit my throat.

"I played him along, however, and I got out of him just where the stuff is hid. There is no reason why you and I should not go and get it. Any of the fellows would go with me, but I want you. You and I could go East and you could show me around.

"I want to see a big-league ball game and Coney Island and the president and a whole lot of things. You could sort of show me how to spend my money. That crowd over there at the bunk house would not know what to do with money if they had it."

"How did your honest friend acquire all this wealth?" asked the tall man, with a smile of incredulity.

"No kiddin', Steve!" said the young man. "You needn't smile. This greaser was telling me the truth. Villa had been raidin', and he had three mules

loaded with money and jewelry he had stolen. El Callado and two others got away with the mules and buried the loot before they were caught up with.

"The other two were killed; but El Callado got away, although he was wounded. He has never been able to get that stuff yet, and I know where it is. Are you game?"

Ellis stopped smiling. He realized that his young friend had no doubt of the truth of the Mexican's story. Jim McCurdy's talk of going after the buried treasure was not bluff.

Steve gave his friend some very earnest and well-meant advice.

"As soon as your father gets back from his trip to town," he concluded, "I'm going to tell him all about El Callado's cache."

Black Don's son scowled and called out, as though speaking to his horse:

"No go, Rubio! No use depending upon a hombre when he's in love."

To this, Steve Ellis made no reply. Jimmy slid down off the fence. He started toward the house and then turned back. The tall man had not moved. Ignoring the fact that they had been talking about something else, Jimmy asked:

"Did you ever hear how Uncle Ben came to leave his home, way back in Indiana?"

"Can't say that I did."

"Well, Uncle Ben's pappy came out of the potato patch and found Uncle Ben settin' on a fence. He up and sez to Uncle Ben, sez he: 'You'll never git nowhar just settin' and ruminatin',' sez he. Then he puts his hoe on his shoulder, and goes on.

"Then Uncle Ben sez to himself, sez he: 'Pappy's alluz right,' sez he.

So he slides down off the fence, and starts goin'. And he keeps on going for thirty years and winds up here. You needn't go with me if you don't want to, but you'd better remember what Uncle Ben's pappy said to Uncle Ben."

Steve Ellis, with a twisted smile on his face, watched the youngster until he disappeared into the ranch house. Then he straightened up with a sudden start and leaped from the fence.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Jimmy is right, and Uncle Ben's father was right."

He whistled as he followed the youth to the house, walking with long, quick strides unlike the walk of a man born to the saddle.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAIL BY MOONLIGHT.

WITH its owner and the foreman both away, Steve Ellis was acting foreman of the XX Ranch. While he held the position, he would eat in the ranch house instead of in the mess house. This meant that he would see Jean McCurdy three times every day.

At the table that evening both Steve and Jimmy were quiet.

Jean fastened her great dark eyes on them questioningly, and, with her scarlet lips parted in a smile, asked:

"What is the matter with you boys?"

"I know what is the matter with him," said Jimmy. "Shall I tell?"

Both Steve Ellis and Jean McCurdy blushed.

"I wonder where Steve and Jimmy are," said Jean McCurdy some time later to Uncle Ben.

She had seated herself in the front-porch hammock. Uncle Ben was a hunched up little bundle on the lower step.

He took his corn-cob pipe out of his mouth to answer. Just then Steve Ellis galloped around the corner of the house, mounted on a big black horse and leading a slender-legged roan.

"Let's go for a gallop in the moonlight!" he cried.

The girl sprang from the porch and leaped into the saddle on the roan.

Uncle Ben chuckled over his corn cob as he watched them gallop away.

"Young 'uns will be young 'uns," he

finally announced to the night. with an air of conviction and finality.

Steve's arrival had driven from the mind of Jimmy's sister all thoughts as to where that young man was. Uncle Ben pondered over the question for a time; but his pipe went out, and he went to bed.

A boat song makes a wonderfully good saddle song, when your horse is loping free. Steve Ellis and Jean McCurdy had galloped several miles down the trail without a word having been spoken. The rhythm of the flying hoofs made soft music that broke the stillness of the moon-swept prairie without discord. Suddenly the girl began to sing. Hers was an excellent contralto voice, like the notes of the orchard oriole.

"On we are floating in sunshine and shadow,
Soft are the ripples that break as we go.
Softly they break on the edge of the meadow,
Wooing the grasses with melodies low."

As the notes of the old song died away on the silent prairie, Steve Ellis leaned forward and grasped the bridle reins of his companion. Throwing himself back in his saddle, he brought both horses to a sudden stop.

"Uncle Ben's pappy was right," he muttered in an undertone. Then as the girl turned to face him, he exclaimed: "I love you, Jean! Will you marry me?"

Gazing into his eager face with a smile, she replied with a question:

"Does the moon often affect you this way, Steve?"

He looked hurt.

"We will let the horses walk back," she said. "I want to talk to you."

"Answer my question," he demanded.

"No," said she.

He was silent.

"I want to talk with you, Steve," she continued. "You have just said you loved me, but do you?

"You have told me very little about yourself, Stephen Montgomery Ellis, but a woman understands much from little. Perhaps, I understand you better than you understand yourself. Your father is a cotton broker in New York. Your family lives on Long Island. You have two sisters younger than yourself and a mother who worships you.

"During the war you got hit by a piece of shell and were also gassed. You have never told me about this, but I know it's true.

"Somewhere you have a little cross that a French general pinned on you as you lay in a French hospital. The shell wound had healed, but the doctors said that your lungs were affected. They said: 'The open spaces for yours.'

"You came West. You finally landed at the XX. When you got lonesome and homesick for the East you began to pay attention to a girl you met there. She was the only woman you saw, and you made yourself believe that you loved her.

"You plan to marry that girl and take her to New York. How do you know that she would fit? Your people would think she was a cowgirl out of the moving pictures. Go back and take your proper place in the world. Forget that you ever met the daughter of a cattleman. Your lungs are all right again, and your heart will soon heal."

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Steve.

As the horses walked back, taking their own time, Steve Ellis pleaded long and earnestly. She listened with downcast eyes, with lips that trembled as they smiled. She listened—that was all.

CHAPTER IV.

HEADIN' SOUTH.

"YES, his horse is gone!" Steve Ellis came running toward the girl standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Here," she said, "I just found this."

Jean handed Steve a bit of yellow paper upon which was written neatly, evidently with labored care, the following brief message:

DEAR SIS: Called away on bizness. Do not wory. Tell dad everythink O. K. See you again soon. Tell Steve to remember what Uncle Ben's pappy said. With love.
JIM.

"What does the boy mean?" she cried. "What did Uncle Ben's pappy say?"

"Well, if I remember Jim's story," said Steve, suppressing a smile, "I think the old gentleman made some remark about never getting anywhere by sitting still, so I think I will hit the trail to the river."

"Oh, Jimmy, why did you do it?" cried the girl, speaking as though her brother could hear." Then she added: "What will your father say?"

"Wait!" called Jean, as Ellis started away. "I am going, too."

The argument that followed was brief. It was possible for it to have but one ending. When Steve galloped away down the trail to the river on the big black, the clean-limbed roan kept pace, and the girl who had ridden with him in the moonlight was again by his side.

It was nine o'clock when they halted at the first water hole. They had been talking as they rode, and had cleared up a number of things concerning Jim's wild venture. His sister had been surprised because she had found his boots and his clothing, even his sombrero in his room. After Ellis had told her of the talk and the fence, they concluded that Jim had taken the advice of El Callado and headed for Mexico dressed as a Mexican. Both admitted that he would have little difficulty in sustaining his part.

At the water hole the horses were unsaddled for a breathing spell, for the ride had been a fierce one. The girl had brought some food. They ate as they discussed the situation, for they had started without breakfast.

"There is not much chance of our catching up with him if he keeps right on going," said Jean, with a troubled smile. "Young Lochinvar had nothing on Jimmy, for Rubio is the best horse on the border."

"What we must do if we do not overtake him," said Ellis, "is to notify the patrol. The captain will send a party after him, even if he gets across the river. How far did you say it was from the ranch to the river?"

"I have heard father say that, by the trail, it was just forty-seven miles."

"There is just about one chance in a hundred that we will come up with him," said Steve, "but we must take that chance."

The black and the roan put the miles behind them rapidly, but it was a weary ride. The sun beat down mercilessly upon the cactus studded plains; and the trail, although seldom used, was very dusty. There was now no water ahead until they reached the Rio Grande—and not a sign of the missing youngster.

For hours both had been aware that they were on a trail that was absolutely cold. There had not been the sign of a hoof mark beyond the first water hole. Both Jean and Steve were fully convinced that Jimmy had headed for Mexico.

It seemed impossible that as good a plainsman as he should have deliberately turned aside from the trail. Good judgment told both that it was useless to push on, if they were not following any one, but Ellis did not like to suggest that they turn back, and Jean, with lips tight-set, kept her face to the south.

"Parada!"

The cry came from the lips of the first of three Mexicans who came galloping up the trail from the south. Jean gave an involuntary cry, but her eyes flashed.

"Don't!" she cried, as Ellis reached for his automatic.

"Look!"—she exclaimed.

A glance around showed horsemen riding toward them from the east and from the west, while two had gained the trail in their rear. The Mexicans had

seen them first, and they were surrounded.

Jean hailed the three Mexicans in Spanish, as they dashed up, but they did not reply. Pulling their horses back on their haunches, all three of them covered Steve Ellis—two with rifles, one with a revolved.

"Arriba!" they screamed.

Steve's hands went up. There is only one thing for a man to do when he is covered by a man, much less by three.

As Ellis' hands went above his head, one of the Mexicans turned in his saddle, and grabbed the bridle of Jean's horse. The black-faced leader, raised himself in his stirrups, quickly reversed his rifle, and brought it down with a crash between Steve's uplifted arms.

The blow landed fairly on the top of Ellis' head. He fell forward in his saddle, then rolled to the ground. Only his sombrero had prevented the blow from crushing his skull.

James Donald McCurdy was in bed when his sister and the temporary foreman of the XX Ranch returned from their moonlight ride. He was not asleep, however, and he watched their return from his window. After they were in the house he got up, and making a light, was for a time very busy with a pencil and a piece of yellow paper. Then he went to bed again, and lay there with his eyes wide open.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when the youth rolled out of bed again, and this time he got very busy. From a closet he took a pair of somewhat dirty white cotton trousers. These he donned together with a short jacket with big sleeves which he pulled on over a cotton undershirt. He wound a long, bright-colored sash tightly around his waist, into which he stuck a long sheath knife.

From the closet he brought a huge pile of straw that no one but a Mexican would have recognized as a hat. There was a strap on it to go under the chin. When he had put on all these things he placed his lantern before a long, old-fashioned mirror, and regarded his reflection critically.

"You're a *pajaro!*" he exclaimed to the figure in the glass.

Rubio had been carefully bedded that night, and was asleep when his master entered the barn. In a short time thereafter the red horse was headed south.

If Jimmy McCurdy's costume was Mexican, so certainly was the outfit he took with him. Mexican horsemen travel lighter than any in the world, except perhaps the gauchos of the pampas.

A handkerchief filled with course corn meal and tied up by the corners, a larger one filled with tobacco, a smaller one filled with brown sugar, a little salt and a pan and they are equipped for a ten-day trip in the wilds.

This was just what Jimmy McCurdy had strapped behind the old Mexican saddle he had placed on Rubio. There was also a little package of *tocine,* or salt pork.

The red horse was full of go, but his rider held him in. Evidently wherever he was going, Black Don's boy was in no hurry. At daylight he watered his horse at the first water hole south of the ranch, but did not tarry here. With his eyes ever on the trail ahead, he came to a hard piece of wind-swept ground where his horse's hoofs left no marks, then he turned to the right.

He rode across the prairie until he had passed a small hillock. Beyond this he tied his horse on the shady side of a giant cactus. Walking back to the hillock, he found that he could lie there in the high grass and command a view of the water hole.

From this point of observation he watched his sister and Steve Ellis eat their breakfast sandwiches. He could almost imagine that he could hear what they were saying.

True to the instinct of the hunted—

be he man or beast—Jimmy McCurdy had planned to get behind his pursuers. When Steve Ellis and Jean McCurdy had disappeared as the trail dropped to the south, he arose and proceeded on his leisurely way with their trail plain before him all the way.

CHAPTER V.

ACROSS THE RIO GRANDE.

WHEN she saw Ellis struck down, Jean McCurdy did not faint. She did not even scream. Before his assailants could raise a hand to prevent, she had leaped from her horse with a canteen in her hand, and was bending over the prostrate figure.

Kneeling in the midst of the prancing horses, she raised his head and felt to discover if his skull was crushed. She was pouring water on his head when the man who had struck Ellis grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her to her feet.

"Let the pig alone," he commanded,

"There will be a great squealing of Mexican pigs if this man dies," the girl shot back.

The whole gang had ridden back by this time. Jean found herself in a group of about twenty horsemen. Like most bands of Mexican rough riders the group around Jean McCurdy was largely composed of very young men; but, although she had known Mexicans all her life, she realized that never before had she seen as wild a crowd as this.

Soon all were talking at once, and Jean quickly discovered that they knew who she was, and were already discussing the proper size of a ransom. After a few moments, however, the leader interrupted the parley with sharp commands.

Part of the band rode on ahead, while others rode back on the trail, leaving the man and the girl with the three who had made the assault. Ellis still lay as though dead, in the dust of the trail.

Without speaking to Jean the leader unwound his *lazo* and tossed the noose over her head. Riding up close to her, with a deft motion he wound the rope around her, binding her arms tightly to her sides. Having fastened her securely, he pulled her up on the saddle in front of him.

The two other men dismounted, and, after having roped the unconscious form, threw Ellis across his horse's back. Then, with their prisoners, they turned their horses south, and started for the river.

It was dark when Ellis recovered his senses. His head ached; his eyes burned. His ears roared, and he found that he could not move. At first he could not remember. He thought that he was back in a certain hospital in France, and turned his head to see long familiar row of snow-white cots.

Then it all came to him. He realized that he was lying on the ground, tightly bound with a rope and that the mosquitoes were biting cruelly. For a time he lay quiet, trying to gain some idea of his surroundings.

His one thought was of Jean. All realization of his pains vanished at the bitter memory of her in danger, and of his failure to protect her. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that he lay at the foot of a small tree in a small grove, evidently in the bottomland along the river.

He heard horses moving about him. When he raised his head a little, he saw two men seated on a log. Evidently the rest of the band were asleep. The moon shone full upon the two men on the log.

One was bareheaded. He was a big man with a beard. The other's face was turned toward Ellis, but his big sombrero threw all the upper part of his body into shadow. The thought came to Ellis that there was something very familiar about the fellow's slender form, but just then he of the big sombrero

spoke to the other man, who arose and came toward Ellis.

It was evident that the smaller of the two watchers had seen Steve move, and informed the other. The big fellow inspected Steve's bonds in surly silence, and found them tight.

Ellis closed his eyes again, satisfied that his thought was only a wild fancy.

For a time he again lay still, trying to classify the soft noises of the night. Suddenly there was a new sound mingled for an instant with the buzzing of the insects and the munching of the horses. Ellis thought he heard his name called softly.

Perhaps it was but another idle fancy like his thought about the man on the log, but for an instant he was sure he heard the word "Steve" called in a voice that had the note of an oriole.

As he lay listening, he saw the smaller of the two men on the log spring to his feet, and glance at his companion, who did not move. The fellow disappeared into the night. Again, Steve thought he heard a human voice—then another—speaking every low, and sounding to his ringing ears as though they were miles away. He saw the figure return to its place on the log, and then all that he could hear was the occasional hoot of an owl.

Ellis had no desire to again attract the attention of the sharp-eyed watcher to himself, but he had to take a chance. He found that, in spite of his bonds, he could draw up his knees; and that, by planting his heels firmly, he could get a purchase that would enable him to propel his body, head first, for a short distance.

It was a slow and painful process, but there was also hope in the fact that the progress of the moon in its journey across the heavens had been such as to now throw him into the shadow of the tree. Slowly he began to work his painful way in the direction from which the voice had seemed to come.

He felt somehow that the watcher knew what he was doing and wondered vaguely why he did not come to stop him. Having moved his position, he could no longer see the figures on the log. Every now and then he ceased his exertions for a time to rest and listen.

Several times he thought that he heard some one moving around the camp, but no one came to disturb him. He had gotten some distance from the tree; and. having heard nothing more of the voice he was trying to locate, he became somewhat bewildered.

He could not see what he was pushing himself into. He realized that if he should happen to collide with one of the sleepers, a sudden awakening might result in a shot that would mean his finish.

Finally he realized that he had lost all idea as to what direction the voice had come from—if indeed he had heard Jean's voice at all. His head began to roar again, and he all but relapsed into unconsciousness.

There was no doubt about it. The steps were very light, but some one was approaching. Steve closed his eyes and lay perfectly still; but, when some one knelt at his side he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the long blade of a knife glistening in the moonlight just over his heart. A small man wearing a big sombrero was bending over him and saying:

"'Sh—'sh—'sh!"

If Ellis was not dreaming there were two figures bending over him, and as the knife flashed, some one raised his head and kissed him on the forehead.

"I saw you, sis'," whispered he of the knife, and Steve Ellis knew that he was not dreaming.

Steve would have spoken, but a small hand was placed over his mouth. As the rope fell from him in bits Jean asked him in a whisper how he was, and took her hand from his mouth to hear his answer.

"Never better," he whispered.

"You're pretty good at crawlin' on your back, Steve," said McCurdy softly. "Do you think you can turn over and crawl?"

Crawl they did; Jimmy leading the way, and no one speaking. Steve caught a glimpse of sleeping men and of one figure lying by a log that seemed to be bound and gagged. Finally they came to the horses.

All the horses had been hobbled, but all the hobbles had been cut. The other horses, all of them loose, were grazing in a bunch between the scrub oaks and the river.

"Where are our horses? Where is Rubio?" Jean McCurdy turned to her brother with these questions when she saw the three horses saddled and tied were not the ones they had ridden from the ranch.

"Are you strong enough to ride?" asked Jimmy of Steve Ellis, ignoring his sister's questions.

They were now some distance from the sleeping camp, and he spoke in his natural tone.

"Oh, I am all right," said Ellis.

"Get on these horses," said Jimmy, "and follow that bunch down there."

He pointed at the group of grazing horses.

As soon as they were mounted Jimmy gave a sharp whistle. His sister and Steve Ellis turned in surprise, for it was loud enough to wake even a sleeping peon.

At the sound of the whistle one of the horses threw up its head and answered with a resounding neigh. It then began to bite and kick the other horses, and Jean and Steve realized that this was Rubio—without even a halter on him. In an instant, the whole bunch was in motion, and Rubio, taking his place in the front, led it to the river.

The three on horseback followed the stampeded herd, Jimmy McCurdy giving a wild shout as their mounts leaped forward. They were soon in the river, and soon on the other side. They heard a few scattered shots, but not one bullet came their way.

As they rode along the trail, once more in the States, Jean turned to her brother and said:

"James McCurdy, what does all this mean? I want to know everything, and I want to know now."

"All right, sis," grinned the young man. "Just wait until I get my horse. Reddy is a natural-born rustler. Did you see him get that bunch in motion?"

He gave another shrill whistle, and this time the red horse did not bolt. He was not carrying the bunch, that was following him like a lot of sheep, very rapidly. When his master whistled, he whirled and came trotting back. In an instant, James McCurdy switched his saddle, and was again mounted on the best horse on the border.

Then Jean and Steve listened in silence, as Jimmy talked.

"It was very easy," said he. "I came up with the bunch that was in the rear. They were all about my own age except 'Whiskers.' When I told them I had crossed the river to get myself a horse, they said that I was some picker. Then, I found out about you people and of course I joined up with the gang.

"It was Tambanio's outfit. I knew all about him from El Callado. I kept close to Jean when we came up with the bunch, but she didn't know it. I got put on watch, and I saw Steve when he came to.

"I didn't want him to queer my game, however, so I tipped him off to old Whiskers, who was on watch with me. That made Whiskers think I was sure enough all right; and, when he went to sleep, I fixed him up to lay dead for a time.

"Then I let you loose, and here we are. It was dead easy. What do you think of that bunch of horses, brother? You see, I call you 'brother,' Steve,

just to get in practice. Oh, look coming"

Donald McCurdy came up with four of his men like the rush of a cyclone.

"Thank Heaven!" was what he said as he pulled up his horse, and looked at his children and their companion.

Jimmy rode home side by side with Donald McCurdy. What father said to son concerns those two alone.

Jean McCurdy and Steve Ellis rode side by side, and what they said to each other was purely personal.

The cowboys had asked to be allowed to cross the river and hunt down the Mexicans, but Don McCurdy smiled grimly and said:

"No use trying to find a Mexican when he is on foot. Those fellows can disappear like prairie dogs into their holes."

Two mornings afterward Steve Ellis walked down to the corner of the horse corral where a gray-eyed boy was brushing the flank of a sorrel horse.

"Jimmy," he said, "I have been talking with your father. Your sister and I are going to make a little trip to California. On our way back we are going to pick you up and take you East with us. You are going to school, and whatever else you do, I will let you play on the ball team. What do you say?"

"I get to see a big-league game, and Coney Island, and everything?"

"Sure."

"Well," said Jimmy, winking, "you remember what Uncle Ben's pappy said."

Then, after Steve had seen some one in the doorway, and bounded away, Jimmy whispered in the red horse's ear:

"These schools have what they call vacations, old fellow. I ain't goin' to stay long. When I get back you and I are goin' to hit the trail to the river again pronto."

BLUE LURE

OUT where the mountains hold
Purple and sunset gold
There lives my heart.
Always at night I hear
Winds calling, far and near,
And I would start

Out along morning trails,
Out where an eagle sails
High in the blue,
Somehow, my heart must go
Out where the west winds blow,
Singing of you.

I would see mountains rear
Themselves on sky lines near,
Peace everywhere.
Out where a sunset spills,
Out where a white sail fills,
Oh—take me there.

CRISTEL HASTINGS.

The Light Burners

By John Mersereau.

A Forest Ranger Story

A SERIAL—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

A NEW RANGER ARRIVES.

WITH a worried frown pulling at his heavy brows, Assistant Forest Supervisor Norton sighted the biweekly stage drag into view atop the ridge and come swinging down the long, dusty grade that passed directly by the East Fork Ranger Station.

He had been on watch for all of a half hour. Yet, there was a characteristic lack of haste to his movements as he raised the powerful binocular in his hand and focused it on the approaching vehicle. A moment sufficed. He gave no sign either of pleasure or disappointment. But the lines of weary tension cornering his bleak gray eyes and tight-clamped jaw did not relax as he turned abruptly and entered the station office.

The station was practically deserted at the moment. Buford, the resident district ranger, was off on a reconnaissance back of Spindle Top. Only the dispatcher, a very young man, sat at a desk in the far corner, industriously checking over time claims put in after last week's big fire.

Norton dropped disgustedly into a chair. He had hoped for and expected a substantial answer to-day from his urgent appeal to the main office at San Francisco; and he knew now that this answer would not be forthcoming.

"Judas!" he burst out. "I sure thought I made it strong enough. 'Imperative,' I said. Yet they'll dally along down there, I reckon, till another thirty thousand acres of the San Simeon goes up in smoke! What the devil do they make national forests for if——"

The dispatcher pulled a plug from the switchboard above his desk and looked up sympathetically.

"No luck to-day, eh, chief?" he asked.

"No luck is right!" Norton fumed. One of those stanch, untutored veterans fast dying out of the forest service, his language was as forthright and vital as his love for the "Pine Tree" badge he wore. "No—damn—luck, Vasey! I'll light a torch under some one for it, too! There's no one on the stage at all but a couple of kids—flunkeys for Dave

Sloper's loggin' camp, I reckon. And I asked 'em to send me up pronto a he-man that knew how to use his head and fists!

"They'll let it slide, of course—the old alibi, lack of funds. And still they'll have the dad-blamed gall to yank me up on the carpet because I can't patrol the whole San Simeon with a short force of men, corner three crown fires at once and, with time hangin' heavy on my hands, round up the shiftiest passel of light burners in the Californy Sierras!"

The supervisor paused for breath, his seamed face aglow with resentment. "By the bald-headed Judas, it fair burns me up——"

Regretfully, Norton ceased his sweeping denunciation as the six-horse stage pulled to a stop outside with a scream of brakes and the rattle of slack trace chains. The driver, a tall, gaunt mountain man, helped himself to a chew of "twist" and took his own good time about coming in with the mail. Even then his attitude betrayed open hostility, and he answered the supervisor's friendly greeting with the surliest of grunts.

Norton let it pass without remark. Old-timer that he was, he had good reason to know something of the senseless distrust and enmity that many remote mountain districts hold toward the ranger service. It was part of his task as he saw it to conquer that suspicion, even though his efforts had met with small success so far in the San Simeon.

"Any letters this trip, Barstow?" he asked quietly.

"Dunno." The driver shrugged. "Ain't looked yet. Got any balin' wire?"

"Go out to the barn and help yourself—after you hunt through that mail."

Barstow reached into a pocket reluctantly and pulled out a long envelope, staring at it before handing it over.

"Not stamped; official business," he remarked insolently. "Must be somethin' important, hey?"

"Perhaps." Norton held the other's glance coolly until the big mountaineer batted his eyes and turned away. Then he quickly tore open the envelope and ran through the contents of the amazing letter sent him from headquarters. In part it read:

Because of the imminent approach of the peak of the fire-hazard season, we are unable at this time to detail to the San Simeon a ranger qualified with both the field and technical experience of the sort you specify. However, we are sending you to-day a newcomer to the service, Assistant Ranger Caleb Gill, who comes to us with the highest recommendations of the University of California authorities. A graduate of the forestry school there, he is as well experienced in the most modern methods of crime detection; and we rather think that he may fill your needs with a necessary amount of practical assistance.

There was more to it than that, but Norton read no farther.

"Merciful Heaven!" he muttered. "'Practical assistance;' I know what that'll mean. I ask 'em for a life preserver and they send me an anchor! A rah-rah lounge lizard that I'll have to put a bell on to find him when he gets dizzy makin' circles through the San Simeon.

"I'll be a laughin'stock from Snyder's Gulch to Wolf Crick when these hillbilly boys start puttin' the Injun sign on him. But what the devil is holdin' him up if he's due to-day? I'll discipline him——"

A sudden explosion, like that of a pistol shot, caused the supervisor to face alertly toward the door. There he saw that Barstow, having performed some mysterious operation on the harness with the borrowed wire, was in a moment back on his seat.

The driver again swung his long whip back and forward, popping it over the wheelers' heads. The stage lunged into motion—leaving behind on its offside a very absorbed young man.

He stood, cap in hand, rooted in his

tracks, watching the stage roll on down Spindle Top Valley. Nor was he a particularly personable-looking young man on first sight, or on second, for the matter of that.

Hardly five and a half feet in height, he was almost as broad—or so it appeared; and he was possessed of a very stub nose and very, very red hair. That the hair was parted in the middle and slicked down in approved collegiate fashion rather added insult to injury, if that were possible, in Norton's snap appraisal. The supervisor steeled himself for the ordeal and stepped out into the roadway, prepared for the worst.

"Are you," he asked, almost breathlessly, "are you by any chance Assistant Ranger Caleb Gill, newly detailed to the San Simeon Forest?"

The boy reluctantly tore his glance away from the fast-disappearing stage.

"Eh?" he asked dazedly. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

As he repeated his question, Norton observed that the youngster had wide-set, twinkling blue eyes and a good jaw. That helped a little.

"Yes, sir! I'm Gill," the other admitted.

"Well—I'm Assistant Forest Supervisor Norton, Gill. Glad you're going to be one of us." Norton's manner was truly friendly. He held out his hand. And once more he had to note that the boy's clasp left nothing to be desired save, perhaps, a little more discretion in its application. "You can bunk in Buford's bed to-night, son; and after supper I'll give you an idee of what we're up against here. Come along."

Caleb Gill picked up a battered tan suit case from the roadside. But before going on he cast a lingering glance up and down the narrow precipitous valley. Directly before him was the spick-and-span ranger bungalow, a flag flying from a peeled pole in the dooryard.

To the left showed a barn and a fenced meadow, with three clean-limbed saddlehorses and a mule grazing on the lush pasturage. Back of that rose the pine-clad ridges of the San Simeon National Forest—virgin timber—with old Spindle Top, jagged and harsh of outline, spreading huge flanks to the westering sun.

Gill's eyes widened to the glory of it all. His big shoulders pulled back unconsciously. Here at last were the big big spaces he had dreamed of; life reduced to its primitive, vital essences. Man's country! Moreover—he looked pensively down the road to a settling dust cloud that marked where the Leesville stage had passed from view.

"I'm going to like it here!" he said decisively.

"How the devil could you help likin' it?" Norton wanted to know. "There ain't a place on this green footstool that can hold a candle to the San Simeon. And there ain't a meaner passel of skunks inhabitin' any other neck of the woods!" he added venomously. "Barstows and Fittses and Crawfords; and every man jack of 'em close kin to one another!

"Kentucky got too small for 'em; and too hot, I reckon. They drink enough stump whisky to kill a hawg and still can shoot the buttons off your vest, name the distance. And they like rangers—a long ways off. Life is right interestin' here, son, if you learn to dodge in time!"

"You mean that they've really killed men in the service here?" Gill asked, utterly amazed.

Norton's lips parted in a wide grin.

"Well—not yet." He threw a friendly arm about the boy's shoulder. "I was just trying to pump a little scare into you, son. But they do take a pot shot now and then to sort of prove they can miss if they want to. We all go heeled. And I sure advise you to connect up with some artillery right away, if you haven't already."

"I have a .38 police special coming up with my outfit to-morrow."

The supervisor nodded without much enthusiasm.

"Ain't seen one in years—outside a shootin' gallery," he remarked, innocently. "But I reckon it'll have to do till you get back your strength in this here Sierra air." He glanced up at Spindle Top, now crimsoning in the first glow of twilight. "Judas! It's supper time. A few dozen of Jim Vasey's biscuits'll put your feet back solid on the ground. And then we'll sort of take a sight on the tough job they sent you up here to tackle, son."

CHAPTER II.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS.

AS a matter of fact, Caleb Gill knew next to nothing of the nature of this "tough job" to which he had been detailed. A few weeks before he had presented his credentials and taken the service examination.

Passing that readily enough, he had expected to be sent to Quincy for further training. Instead, a summary order had come to report for duty. He knew that he had been assigned to East Fork on special service of some sort. But his instructions had read simply to "report to Assistant Supervisor Norton for orders." That was all.

Consequently, when Norton led him into the station's cozy living room after supper, his curiosity had reached a peak. And there was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach despite a substantial ballasting of Jim Vasey's biscuits. He was about to receive orders, his first detail, in a new, strange land. Here in the San Simeon, where transplanted Kentucky mountaineers shot from ambush and .38 police revolvers were held in slight esteem! It was sort of breath-taking.

For his part, Supervisor Norton seemed to regard it merely as a bit of the day's work. He stoked up a villainous brier pipe, touched a match to it and lolled comfortably in a seat beside the fireplace.

"Light up and plank yourself, Cale," he suggested amiably, indicating a buckskin-thonged chair opposite. "We don't stand on ceremony here, you know. And we only call each other 'Mister' when we're sore. Got your light, eh? Let's get down to brass tacks. You don't know why you've been sent here, I reckon?"

"No, I don't."

"Good! That was so's you wouldn't spout on the way maybe and spill the beans. Now I'll lay my cards on the table. I asked the main office for a man who had had experience—and success in capturing slick criminals."

"Then they must have made a mistake in sending me," Gill began to protest.

But he got no further.

"That's what I thought," Norton admitted cheerfully, "before I finished readin' my letter from headquarters. Without otherwise slamming your color scheme, you did look a brilliant green when I first gave you the once over. But the letter says you were on the Berkeley police force, one of those scientific cops——"

"Plain harness bull, nights, to help work my way through college," Gill explained. "Of course, I picked up a little."

"Includin' a couple of murderers, eh," Norton put in dryly, "that you ran down all by your lonely!"

Gill fidgeted uncomfortably.

"It was pretty much of a fluke."

"Then that's your hard luck!" the supervisor said, complacently. "You've got a reputation to live up to, son; and I've already passed the buck. But I'll sure make you doggone hard to catch if you throw me down and don't get the goods on these damned light burners of ours in jig time. That's your assignment. The whole San Simeon is your beat. Use your own methods, follow your own trails, report when you like.

Only get 'em with the goods and bring 'em in—the light burners!"

Caleb Gill coughed nervously.

"Why, I—I'm afraid I don't even know what they are."

"What?"

"Light burners."

"And I wish to the great Jehoshaphat that no one else did!" Norton responded feelingly. "Well, then, soak this up. Light burners and light burning are the great curse of the forest service to-day. We don't advertise it, for a lot of reasons, but the big proportion of our fires—here, anyway—aren't caused by the humble cigarette. They're set a-purpose, incendiary, by these so-called light burners.

"To go back to the beginning of it, as I got it, a good many years ago. A prominent Western story writer with a big following wrote a lot of articles in which he boosted light burning. That is, his theory was that fires purposely set at regular intervals in the forests would eat up the windfalls and brush without doin' the big timber any real harm.

"The idea was that a fire every two or three years would be a sort of sweeper and make it impossible for a really big burner to get goin'. He argued that the Injuns did that since time immem—for a hell of a long while, anyway—and look what a fine lot of trees they swapped us along with their New York real estate! At least, that's the way it was told to me.

"It goes all wrong in practice, of course. If the humidity isn't just right, or the wind is wrong, your fire goes out or runs like blazes. And then something else happens and the fire crowns—starts goin' through the tops. Then everything lets loose.

"But that ain't the particular point," Norton rattled on. "The point is that misguided souls everywhere have taken it up—hunters and trappers and cattlemen. It helps 'em all—for a while, and gives 'em an excuse. And they've gone to it with both hands full of matches. They're burnin' us out! And unless we can catch and convict a few before this season is over, the San Simeon is as good as doomed!"

"But they must leave clews!" Gill exclaimed. "Surely they can't all escape."

"Can't they! Well, you try your hand at it, son; they've got the rest of us buffaloed. And we don't quit till we're plumb licked, if I do say so myself.

"In the first place these hombres don't leave tracks. They wrap burlap around their boots. In the second place, they're miles away when the fire starts. Use some sort of timing device, I suspect. And lastly, the whole district is with 'em and protects 'em.

"On top of that, we're short handed. Buford, who runs this station, for instance, has six fire guards and two lookouts and Vasey, the boy who dispatches for him here. With nearly four hundred thousand acres to patrol and protect!

"That's where you come in, Gill. Buford is the only one here they have to keep spotted; his men all have regular posts. But you'll be a free lance, although playin' the part of a greenhorn attached here for experience.

"You'll wander around gettin' the lay of the land. You'll meet the settlers. And I dare say you'll make enough mistakes at first to put over your act convincin'. But all the while you'll be at work. And I'll expect results!"

"I'll do my best," Gill promised fervently. "When do I start out?"

"To-morrow morning. Buford can loan you a horse till you can get around to buyin' one. Spend a few days learning the trails. And Saturday night I'll take you down the valley to the Leesville schoolhouse to meet the settlers. There's a dance on and everybody'll turn out. All the Barstows and Fittses and Crawfords; and old Marvin Landis, mebbe——"

"Landis!" Cale Gill bent forward with sudden eagerness. "Has he a daughter?"

"I'll tell a man he has a daughter!" Norton snapped. "And it beats me how that loony old bug hunter ever happened to have a girl like her. Not that she's a friend of mine. On the contrary! Last time I happened to be projectin' around their place, she run me off at the business end of a .30-30! That girl's got spirit, son, and a head back of her good looks."

"She certainly has!" sighed Ranger Gill.

"You've seen her, then?"

"I met her on the stage coming up." The boy smiled. "I wondered why she looked the other way so quickly when we pulled in here."

"Fooled me," Norton admitted. "Must have had her hair bobbed since I saw her last; and in that rig she wore I thought she was just some kid headin' for the camps. Doggone little tomboy!"

Gill swallowed hard.

"She's—wonderful!" he proclaimed.

"Help!" Norton slumped weakly in his chair. "It's a disease, and you sure come down with it in record time, Cale." His manner became utterly serious again. "But take a little fatherly advice, son. Leave June Landis alone! Keep away from her.

"If you don't, she'll break your heart. That girl is plumb fatal to rangers! Regardless of what she pretends, she hates us all; thinks we're persecutin' her old man. And with your particular job, Gill, you better pull up hard right now before you go ridin' too fast an' mebbe meet with a nasty fall."

During Norton's vehement recital, Gill's face first became a fiery red, then white. His fingers bit into his palms to keep control of a quick temper.

"I know you mean well," he began, sharply, "but it seems to me pretty—unfair to denounce any nice girl like that. And I won't believe that Miss Landis would do anything intentionally wrong."

"Lord bless you, neither will I believe it!" Norton heartily agreed. "You're barking up the wrong tree, son."

Gill looked his perplexity.

"Then what do you mean?"

"Just what I said. That you've lost out before you start. Your job, Cale, is to round up the light burners in the San Simeon. And old Marvin Landis, June's widower dad, is the high priest of the order, or I miss my guess!"

"You have evidence against him?"

"None! He's a butterfly hunter by profession, Cale, and a sour old misanthrope by inclination. Has a cabin up there back of Spindle Top, with butterflies, and beetles stuck on pins all over the walls.

"You should see his face once when he's holdin' a bug over the cyanide bottle to kill the harmless thing. Fair gives me the creeps even to think of it! And it's to his advantage to open up the forest. More butterflies—see? One of these fine days you'll be bringin' him in. Now do you get my drift?"

"Yes; I—understand."

Caleb Gill cupped his chin in his hands and sat staring vacantly into the embers of the fire. His mind already had flown back to the day's ride from the railroad with June Landis. He recalled her quick wit and pleasing, unspoiled naïveté. She was beautiful—and good. He could not believe otherwise. And she was not merely a partial realization of his secret dreams. She was *the* girl!

Already the young ranger had placed her upon the pedestal of his worship. She was unattainable, of course, he had understood that. What girl could possibly want a fellow with ridiculous bench shoulders and a stub nose? And people always laughed at first sight of that flaming hair of his. But that had not meant that he couldn't dream if he wanted to.

Now, however, it was more hopeless

than ever. Aside from all else, one could hardly expect a girl to take kindly to the fellow who had been commissioned to collect evidence against her father. And the whole situation up here was just as complicated.

The beautiful Spindle Top Valley, it seemed, was a hotbed of intrigue. The forests were fired by unseen hands. Transplanted Kentucky feudists shot from ambush at officers of the law. Even June Landis, so Norton said, had threatened him with a rifle.

Gill closed his eyes the better to think. Surely it was all a dream. Things like that didn't happen in these law-abiding times. His eyes blinked open and closed again. His thoughts began to wander aimlessly. It had been a long, hard day.

Distantly, from the verge of sleep, he heard the clumping of heavy boots on the porch outside; then a sharp rap on the door. Norton's chair scraped back as he rose to answer. There was a hurried greeting. A rapid interchange of words, questions and answers. Then Norton's loud, peremptory call to Vasey, who was in another room.

Suddenly Gill found himself wide awake. Norton stood before him, grim-lipped, thrusting a holstered revolver and a dangling cartridge belt into his hands.

"Can you ride?" the supervisor barked.

"Enough to get by, I guess."

"Then come on!"

"What's up?" Gill asked dazedly.

"Buford's been ambushed on the Wolf Crick trail. It's pretty bad, I reckon. We'll be all night bringin' him in. Hurry!"

Ranger Gill buckled the sagging belt about his waist.

"I'm ready," he said.

Norton, similarly armed, offered no reply other than to start on the run for the station barn. But cloaked in the darkness, there showed in his eyes a growing approval of the new recruit to the San Simeon.

CHAPTER III.

LAST WORDS OF RANGER BUFORD.

WHEN Gill reached the barn, a lantern was already flitting like an eerie will-o'-the-wisp across the adjoining pasture. Presently Norton and a dark, lowering-browed stranger came up leading three horses.

The supervisor introduced his companion as they saddled up.

"Cale, meet Eli Barstow, the stage driver's cousin. Found Buford, he says, on the way down from the Landis place."

In the lantern light, Gill noticed that the index finger was missing to the second joint from Barstow's right hand. Otherwise, he might almost have been a twin brother of the stage driver. They had the same vapid, shifting glance, the same cruel lips—and the same gaunt, sinewy build. Well over six feet tall, Eli Barstow stood. Gill felt and looked like a pigmy beside him.

The mountaineer took the lead into the darkness. Norton followed. Gill brought up in the rear. Already the cheery lights of the East Fork station were lost to view. The young ranger felt his heart hammering within his chest. The mystery and suspense of the night had gripped him. In the first hours of his arrival, he had been called to arms in this big and sinister land.

There was no moon. The stars looked cold and distant, but very bright. And there appeared to be millions of them. One shot, dropping, across the sky as Gill looked up. He shivered and took a tighter hold on the bridle rein. He wondered how it must feel to be lying out there on Spindle Top, wounded and alone. And he wondered, gritting his teeth, if he had in him the same self-sacrificing courage as Ranger Buford, the courage to carry on in the face of

cowardly assassins and the enmity of all Spindle Top Valley.

Barstow led on without once faltering or stopping. He seemed gifted with the eyes of a night beast. In all probability, he was simply giving his horse its head. But Gill did not know that. It appeared abnormal to him. For his own part, he was hopelessly lost.

They were in heavy timber now. He could see nothing except the dim outline of Norton's shoulders ahead of him. The trees murmured to the night wind. He could hear the muffled pad of hoofs and the plaintive creaking of saddle leather. The trail led on interminably.

He was startled when Barstow finally drew rein and spoke for the first time during the long ride.

"Over there."

Norton dismounted and thumbed on a flash light. Gill dropped stiffly to the ground, also, and went forward to where the supervisor knelt beside a huddled form. Buford, grown gray and grizzled like Norton in the service, lay in the trail where he had fallen, unconscious. His horse had disappeared.

Gill closed his eyes momentarily at sight of the ugly, clotted stain spattered across the chest of the ranger's flannel shirt. Then, steeling himself, he bent down to help.

The supervisor examined the wound briefly and shook his head. With Gill's aid, he raised the wounded man's shoulders gently and pressed a small emergency flask to his pallid lips. The mouth twitched and, finally, the eyes opened.

Ranger Buford made a ghastly effort at a smile. He tried to speak. Minutes ticked away while he twisted his lips in the stubborn effort. But his words sounded only as an unintelligible muttering.

"Take it easy, old-timer," Norton counseled him patiently. "Something you want to tell me, is there?"

The glazing eyes closed affirmatively and opened again. And at last, summoning all his will to the attempt, the ranger spoke, the whispered words fading away between lengthening pauses.

"I'm done for, chief, but I—ain't afraid. And you'll—get him for me—won't you?"

"I'll get him, Buford!" Norton raised his hand as if he were taking a sacred oath and, unconsciously, Gill raised his own hand in unison. "I'll get him, so help me I will! Who was it shot you, do you know?"

The gray head turned in a painful negative.

"Had words—with Marv—Landis. He accused—Dave Sloper—of—of a——"

The next words were lost in a crashing of brush as Barstow's horse took senseless fright and shied violently from the trail. The animal was brought quickly under control, but not before the dying man had lost the final power of speech. His shoulder fell slack abruptly against Gill's supporting arms. A faint rattle issued from his throat. Ranger Buford had ridden the danger trail of duty and service to its end.

Norton got up slowly and turned to Barstow.

"We won't need you any more tonight, thanks, Eli," he said. "Phone me in the morning, though. They'll probably want you for the inquest."

Nodding silently, the mountaineer strode off into the night. Not a twig snapped under his big, clumsy shoes. There was no rustling of the heavy undergrowth to his passage. He simply disappeared.

For a long moment, the supervisor stood regarding the form huddled on the ground. He knuckled a fist against his eyes, unshamed of his emotion. But stern, grim lines were already forming on his grief-drawn features.

"Gill," he said, "there was a man; my best friend. His gun is still in his holster. They never gave him even a Chinaman's chance to draw. And he

had no personal enemies. The light burners did it! They must have, to cover up something he found.

"They've gone from arson to murder. Now, by Heaven, it's a finish fight! And I'll fight them without mercy or scruple. And when I find him, with my two hands I'll kill the devil that done in Lon Buford!"

Norton's harsh, metallic voice became more gentle.

"I'm an old-timer, son; a fighter and pioneer, that's all. It don't much matter when I shuffle off. My day is about past, anyway. But you're young. It ain't fair to start you out in the service with a mixup like this. Say the word, and I'll order you back to headquarters to-morrow. And I won't think any the less of you for goin', either."

It was one of the greatest moments of decision that Caleb Gill ever was to face. He realized that he was at the parting of the way. Unused to the sight of violent death, it had shocked and sickened him. Police work in a quiet suburb had not been like this.

Even now he felt a little shaky at the knees. And he foresaw that the San Simeon was to be the ground of still more deaths, of a desperate, relentless conflict between the law and a murderous group of light burners. He could share in the great peril of the fight, if he wished, or he could go. The choice was his. Gill reached his decision in a matter of seconds.

"I'm scared," he admitted frankly, "but I want to stick. I want to finish my job in the San Simeon. Maybe I won't make good, but I'll try—I'll try my damnedest!"

"And you'll deliver!" The supervisor paused before offering the game young man his heartfelt approval. "Put it here—ranger!" And out there on the black slope of Spindle Top, beside a dead comrade, with the night wind dirging through the pines, veteran and novice clasped hands.

It was a sad ride back to East Fork, with that gruesome burden hitched fast athwart the extra horse with the supervisor's reata. But it was finally concluded in the small hours before dawn. Norton at once called the county authorities over long distance and made the necessary arrangements for an inquest. Then he and Gill sat down to the hot coffee that Vasey had prepared.

"We'll turn in for two-three hours," the supervisor decided. "There's time yet to catch a nap before sunup."

"I can't sleep," Gill protested.

"You've got to," he was told, with grim emphasis. "It may seem nerve racking, but it ain't. No one can do man's work in this country without rest, son. And there's a big day ahead of you. Barstow and I can give the necessary testimony. You won't have to come to the inquest.

"I sort of want you to get back up the trail and look things over before the sheriff goes to blunderin' around. He means well, I reckon, but that lets him out.

"That's your job, Cale. And by the way"—Norton paused—"I'm goin' to forget at the inquest those few words that Buford said. I don't think Barstow heard any of it at all, and we'll just keep them under our hat and see if they lead anywhere. And after you get through projectin' around, it might be a good hunch to ride up and get acquainted with old Marv Landis. Slip him the news. You know, play poker! See how he reacts."

"But how about that other name Buford mentioned—Dave Sloper? Who is he?"

"Dave Sloper," Norton smiled narrowly, "is the only light burner in Spindle Top Valley who has my complete sympathy. He owns a lumber mill and quite an acreage east of here, just outside the forest boundary. Used to be rich before he got sold on light burning. And I'll tell a man he got sold right!

"He had a marvelous stand of yellow pine willed to him by his dad. A few seasons ago he tried burning on an isolated quarter section. Worked fine. Conditions happened to be perfect and it was small enough to handle. So next year he went whole hawg—and lost everything he owned except the mill. Even his fancy ridin' pants got scorched off him!

"All he can do now," the supervisor concluded, "is to coast along on patches of burn we sell him to save it from rotting. That was one light burner that sure got converted right!"

"But what could Buford have meant," Gill puzzled, "when he said that Landis had accused Sloper?"

"I don't know. That part wasn't important to us, I reckon. You see"—Norton cocked a wise eye at his assistant—"it's a peculiar situation there. Landis don't seem to have any use for Sloper, and yet he lets him have the inside track with June.

"Wouldn't surprise me, in fact, if something came of it after while. Not that the girl shows Dave any particular favor that I know of, but he's good lookin' in his way, the biggest business man in this country—and persistent as the very devil. The sort that usually gets what they go after.

"And he's plumb welcome to her!" the supervisor proclaimed feelingly. "I'd sooner be tied to a catamount than be hitched to June Landis. Judas! That girl ain't even halter broke, let alone trained for double harness. And she sure handles a mean .30-30. I'm still sore where she poked it against my brisket!"

CHAPTER IV.

TRAILING CLEWS.

MORNING came to the San Simeon with the perfection of a flawless jewel. Jays quarreled in the pines. In the manzanita scrub linnets sang. The meadow grass sparkled with dew. Even the jagged sides of Spindle Top showed warm and friendly to the rising sun.

After an early breakfast, Ranger Gill made ready to ride out to investigate the scene of last night's tragedy. Norton accompanied him to the barn and gave a parting direction while he saddled up.

"It's all clear trail as far as Hannegan's Meadows," the supervisor explained. "Then take the left fork. You can't miss it. Then, when you're done lookin' around, go on about another eight miles around Spindle Top to the head of Wolf Crick. You'll see the Landis place from the ridge. And," he added, "if they should happen to ask you to stay all night, accept the invitation. You won't be wastin' your time."

Gill nodded; but he paused, before mounting, to put a last question.

"I've been wondering—did you happen to ask Eli Barstow what reason he had for being on the trail last night when he found Buford?"

"No, I didn't," Norton admitted. "He's like all of 'em hereabouts, you know, ready to take offense at the drop of a hat. But he mentioned somethin' about comin' back from his brother-in-law Crawford's place down beyond the Landis cabin, scoutin' for a stray mule.

"The meadows reely ain't so far out of his way goin' home. It's a good alibi, whether it's a lie or not. And he'll have a dozen relatives ready to back it up by now. You'll go nowheres questionin' him about that."

"And does he go armed, do you know?"

"Absolutely, without havin' looked! Pull up any hill-billy's vest in this country, if you've got the nerve, and you'll find a gun jammed down behind his waistband!"

Gill swung into the saddle without further comment.

"Take care of yourself and watch your step!" the supervisor bade him farewell.

The young ranger easily followed the trail up through the pines. In fact, through the thick timber and undergrowth, it would have been almost impossible to deviate from it. For a time, Gill gave his full attention to the spirited roan pony he rode. He decided to buy it, if that could be arranged, on the settlement of Buford's estate.

Presently the way grew steeper, and the willing animal settled down to a steady walk. Gill's mind focused again on the purpose of his quest. He reviewed the meager details Norton had given him, and the few facts he had gained at firsthand.

One point alone stood out, leading to any number of unanswerable questions. Buford, the moment before his death, had tried to make some disclosure. What, the ranger wondered, might have been its nature? Had it a genuine importance, or was it the chance thought of a mind fast slipping into oblivion? And why had Eli Barstow's mount shied with such sudden violence while the other horses remained undisturbed? Could that have been managed for the very purpose of drowning out some vital statement?

There was even more to it than that. The questions revolved in the ranger's mind like an endless chain. The enigma multiplied within itself. Then, too, there was June Landis to be thought of.

Gill could not dispel her from his thoughts. And for some unaccountable reason, he had already formed an active prejudice against Dave Sloper—without ever having encountered the mill owner!

Two miles beyond Hannegan's Meadows, a long and marshy natural swale, Gill arrived at the point where Buford had been shot. Dismounting, he trailed his reins and set to work. In the immediate vicinity, of course, the ground had been trampled over the night before. That had been unavoidable. The ranger cast about diligently, but he could find no footprints other than his own, Norton's, and those of Eli Barstow. And up the trail a way, in a depression, he discovered hoofprints that he presumed must be those of Buford's horse—a single set of them, heading toward East Fork. That bore out the supervisor's belief that the animal would shortly make its own way back to the station meadow.

Gill sat down beside the trail and lit his pipe. It seemed evident that Buford had been shot from some distance. The ranger accordingly searched the opposite slope for an advantageous cover. Three such spots instantly nominated themselves to his attention, and he inspected them one after the other.

The first revealed nothing. The second was likewise barren. But the third, a manzanita clump overtowered by a giant pine, showed positive evidence of recent occupation. A number of dry twigs close to the ground had been broken off to make room for a sighting hole; and the thick litter of pine needles had cushioned the prone body of a man.

Gill unholstered his borrowed revolver and demonstrated to his own satisfaction that the murderer could easily have fired from this spot. Not that he could have duplicated the feat, for the distance was well over a hundred yards. That called for expert marksmanship, if a revolver or automatic had been used.

The ranger continued his painstaking search for evidence without further success for some time. He was about to leave the spot as completely canvassed when, quite by chance, he detected the glitter of metal beneath some scattered leaves. With a little cry of elation, he scooped up an empty cartridge case. It was of .38 caliber, rimless, and undoubtedly from the killer's weapon!

The next step was to trail the murderer from his hiding place. This was not difficult for some distance, even though Gill knew next to nothing of tracking. There were deep indentures

in the thick layer of slipper pine needles carpeting the hillside. The ranger followed these readily over a rise for all of a quarter mile. There he located the spot where a horse had been tethered for some time.

Gill made no attempt to follow on with this lead. He guessed, accurately enough, that his man would naturally ride up into the rim rock and effectually blot out his trail. But another bit of damning evidence had been left right here—a wisp of horsehair rubbed off against the jagged bark of a pine tree!

It was now well on past noontime. Whistling softly, the boy returned to the trail and ate the pocket lunch that he had brought along. Well pleased with his morning's findings, he rode on north of east toward the shoulder of Spindle Top.

He had gained two valuable pointers already, an empty cartridge case and the fragment of hair now folded carefully in his handkerchief. Unquestionably the assassin had ridden a buckskin horse. So far, clews had presented themselves with ridiculous ease.

It did not occur to Gill that mountain men, too, might have a pretty shrewd idea of the worth of evidence.

CHAPTER V.

AN INVITATION AND JUNE.

FROM the eastern shoulder of Spindle Top, it was an easy task to discover the home of Marvin Landis in the timbered canyon far below. Surrounded by fruit trees and a garden, the log cabin nestled on a level bench perhaps an acre in extent; and even at a distance Gill could detect the crimson of rose blooms trellised against the walls. Smoke trailed lazily from a chimney at one end. At the other was a comfortable porch, furnished with folding striped-canvas chairs.

It was a mighty cozy-looking place, Gill thought. Not at all the home one would imagine for the crabbed and unapproachable recluse that Marvin Landis was reputed to be. June could not be responsible for it all.

The trees and garden had been cultivated industriously. The beds of old-fashioned flowers revealed a nature passionately aware of beauty. The cabin, too, had an atmosphere of peace that could not be counterfeit.

The ranger dismounted at the gate. There he paused for several minutes, hesitating to intrude. It seemed almost a sacrilege to seek here a fanatic who destroyed with fire. And it was doubly difficult to associate June Landis as the possible accomplice of such a vicious criminal. It simply could not be!

Yet Gill had his duty to perform. During the day he had passed again and again through desolated stretches where the flames had spread their ruin. He had seen charred and blackened wastes that once had been magnificent timber. And Buford had been killed—not as one fighting man against another, but by the unseen hand of a skulking coward.

Cale Gill hesitated no longer. He went briskly up the path to the porch and knocked on the puncheon door. He heard a startled scurrying of soft footsteps within and waited expectantly for a response. None came while minutes ticked away. He knocked again and waited, without result.

Gill's straightforward blue eyes began to narrow resentfully. There had been no mistaking the sound of those footsteps. Some one was at home. Perhaps this was the method Landis used to discourage visitors. Well, then, here was one who could play a waiting game, too. The ranger dropped into a porch chair and drew out his pipe.

The tight lines quickly erased themselves from about his mouth. He chuckled as the humor of his position struck home to him. During his long ride, he had beguiled the time by imagin-

ing any number of ways in which he might be greeted by Marvin Landis and his beautiful daughter. Not one of those ways had been so lacking in romance as this complete ignoring of his presence!

Still, it might have been worse. For one thing, it felt mighty good to relax after unaccustomed hours in the saddle. Then, the afternoon sun was warm, and it was pleasant to hear the bees droning in the flower-scented garden. Gill slumped lower in his chair and closed his eyes. Half dozing, he reached up a hand to brush away an insect humming close to his head.

With a sudden cry of pain, he sprang up and clapped a hand to his face. Almost simultaneously, the front door burst open and June Landis ran out to face him, wide-eyed and frightened. And for all his hurt, the ranger paid again an inward tribute to her beauty.

She had been crying. Tears still beaded her long lashes. But that could not detract from the life and depth of her splendid, tawny eyes. And even the most boyish of bobs left the luster to her curly raven hair and accentuated the delicate, purely feminine outlines of her face.

An expert might have criticised the overfirm lines of mouth and chin, perhaps, and possibly the capable, strong arms. But he must have admitted that June Landis had all the piquant grace of a forest flower; and her sun-tanned cheeks, untouched by cosmetics, told their own tale of superabundant health and vitality.

"I thought——" she began breathlessly. "I was afraid that you——"

"I've been stung," Ranger Caleb Gill informed her with some dignity, "by one of your confounded bees!"

June's chin tilted up. "Then you must have been annoying it!"

They stared at each other truculently for a moment. And suddenly, without further preamble, they both began to laugh.

"You might have opened the door when I knocked." Gill charged her aggrievedly, but with a saving grin.

"I'm sorry. I thought it was some one else," the girl replied. "Does the bite hurt much?"

"Of course it hurts," Gill admitted shamelessly.

"Well, come in and let me doctor you up. A little mud is the very best thing for relief."

"I'll suffer," the ranger decided hastily. "But I'll be glad to come in, if I may."

June Landis led the way into a living room that was truly remarkable in some respects. The peeled log walls had been left unfinished save for a chinking of clay that was smooth and hard as any plaster. Rag rugs carpeted the rough puncheon floor, and the windows were curtained with bright flowered cretonne. At one end was a crude stone fireplace, with well-filled bookcases on either side. Near by were several wicker chairs and a small cabinet organ.

But it was the opposite wall that riveted Gill's attention. It was a veritable rainbow of color, a symphony of the most gorgeous hues and shades that nature ever has produced. Butterflies! Hundreds of them, neatly transfixed on thin points of steel pressed into the log walls. It was a veritable mortuary exhibiting every species and variety of butterfly to be found in the San Simeon.

Gill examined the collection with genuine appreciation. June rattled off their scientific names with an ease and certainty that was bewildering. And some were not butterflies at all, it seemed, but moths.

"You certainly know all about them, don't you!" the ranger said, admiringly.

"I should. I've been helping dad collect them for years and years. That's how we make our living. We've received as much as a hundred dollars for a rare specimen."

"A hundred dollars!"

"Just once. I wouldn't advise it as a get-rich-quick profession." The girl compressed her lips. "Now, if you'll help me, we'll move out the table for supper. We have no dining room, you know. And you'll have to sleep in here to-night on the lounge."

Gill eyed his companion in amazement.

"But I didn't know that I'd been invited yet! I didn't expect——"

"You came to see my father, didn't you?"

"In a way, yes—I did."

"Well, he's out netting in the meadows down Wolf Creek. He won't be back home until dark. So you'll have to stay to supper. And you'd hardly expect to be turned out then to ride clear back to East Fork, would you?" June smiled. "You're more than welcome."

Before the ranger could offer halting thanks and acceptance, the girl came close and laid an appealing hand on his arm. There was a troubled light in her splendid eyes.

"You're a good, clean boy, Caleb Gill," she said. "I think I'm going to like you a lot. But please let me give you a little advice: Don't lie to my father. Because he'll catch you up if you do—and hate you. And I hate any one my father hates!"

"But why," Gill demanded, "why should I lie to him?"

"Because they all do! Because they suspect him of being a light burner and are always trying to trap him." The girl's eyes were flashing now. Gill felt the convulsive pressure of her fingers on his arm. "Almost since the day we moved up here to make a peaceful, quiet living, we've been persecuted by the forest service.

"We've been spied on, tracked and warned. They think it funny that an educated man can find happiness and contentment away off here. They think my father a suspicious character because he attends strictly to his own affairs. And Supervisor Norton turns every new man against us at the start."

"Norton has the highest regard and respect for you, I'm sure," Gill interjected.

"For my rifle, perhaps!" June amended hotly.

"Come to think of it, he did mention that," the ranger grinned. "But there's no reason why we shouldn't be friends, is there? I won't lie to your dad, I promise you that. Furthermore," he added impulsively, "I'm going to put my cards on the table—to you. Perhaps we can work together and clear up this misunderstanding for good and all. I was sent up here to get acquainted with your father and check up a few points if possible because—Ranger Buford was killed last night."

"Killed!" The girl's cheeks slowly drained of color. She leaned weakly against a chair for support. "Where?"

"On the trail about two miles this side of Hannegan's Meadows. Shot down from ambush."

"And you suspect my father?"

"Not definitely at all," Gill assured her, after an imperceptible pause. "We haven't a bit of physical evidence pointing toward him. Unfortunately, however, it *is* true that your father is suspected of being a light burner. That automatically places him under suspicion in connection with this other crime.

"Moreover, Buford managed to say just before he died that he had had words with Marvin Landis. That was exactly the way he put it. And I think your father should be glad to explain what happened between them, for Buford's sake, if not for his own. It was murder, you know—cold, brutal murder. Petty personal differences should be forgotten at such a time, it seems to me."

"My father will be glad to help, I'm sure," June said, in a dry, strained voice. "He did have an argument with Buford early yesterday afternoon. But they

came to an understanding finally and parted amicably, if hardly friends. I was washing dishes and heard nothing of their conversation, but from the kitchen window I saw them shake hands down by the gate."

"Good!" Gill was genuinely pleased with this development. "As far as I'm concerned, that closes this angle of the case. And I only ask one thing more, to convince Supervisor Norton: your word that your father was home here at suppertime last night and during the early hours of the evening."

The girl's lashes drooped defensively under his steady scrutiny. Caleb Gill saw her hands clench and whiten over the loose folds of her bungalow apron. But she faced him bravely for all that. There was no other sign that she was struggling desperately to maintain an air of innocent composure.

"You have my word," she said slowly. "My father was home all of last evening and at suppertime."

The ranger had accepted at face value everything June Landis had told him—until now. But this he could not accept. The girl was her own accuser. Frank by nature and despising deception, her one false statement was pitifully transparent. Gill could only stare at her in silence, hurt and saddened by her breach of faith. A long minute passed without either of them speaking.

"You—believe me?" June faltered at last.

"No." Gill's voice was low, unsteady. He swallowed hard. "No, I don't believe you." He picked up his cap. "I—I guess I'd better go."

"Wait!" The mountain girl seized his arms in a despairing, frantic hold. "You're not going to arrest him! He's all I have. I'll fight for him!" she cried passionately. "I'll——"

Caleb Gill gently disengaged the grip of her hands.

"I have no intention of arresting your father now," he said. "I told you in the beginning that we have no real evidence against him. And, believe me, I want to help you prove his innocence. I want to be your friend."

June looked up at him through a mist of tears. It had been a long, long time since she had known any one in whom she could confide. And those big, sturdy shoulders seemed to offer a refuge from all her fears.

Suddenly, Gill's sympathy was changed to consternation. His face flushed a deep crimson. He didn't know how it had happened—not through any intention on his part, he was sure of that. But June Landis was in his arms. More than that, she was sobbing against his chest. And there was not the shadow of a rule in the ranger manual to cope with such an emergency as that!

"I did lie to you!" the girl confessed brokenly. "Dad wasn't home to supper last night. He was out late hunting moths. But he didn't kill Ranger Buford. I told you the truth when I said that they parted on good terms. You'll believe that much, won't you?"

"Every word of it!"

June drew away from him. Her quick smile was like the coming of bright sunlight from behind a thunderhead.

"I do want and need you to be my friend. It's lonely up here sometimes—so lonely!—even with dad. And it frightens me when he gets to brooding. He's terribly worried about something. He tries to hide it from me, and I don't dare question him. But I think he took Buford into his confidence yesterday. He seemed—well, almost carefree when he left this morning."

The girl paused as a call, faint with distance and from down the canyon, came drifting in an open window.

"That's dad! He's early, but you'll stay to-night, won't you—and try to make friends with him?"

"If the invitation still holds good after he arrives."

"Then I'll run into my room and fix up a little." June paused in the doorway, dabbing at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief and smiling wistfully. "If you really want to make a good first impression, be reading Anatole France or Turgenev when he comes in. He adores them both."

Ranger Caleb Gill dropped into a chair, sighing. Things had certainly been moving with some celerity since his arrival in the San Simeon. And here he was pulled up against another facer.

He scanned the formidable rows of books in the nearer case with some trepidation. Not that he didn't enjoy reading, but he had had little enough time for sleep at college—let alone any exploring of the bypaths of literature—after studying and pounding a beat for sixteen hours a day.

"Anatole France? Turgenev?" he muttered. "Where have I ever heard those names before?"

CHAPTER VI.

INVOLVING A BUG HUNTER.

AS her father passed through the gateway, June Landis ran down the path to meet him. From a window, Gill observed their affectionate embrace. And he observed, too, that Marvin Landis was not at all the conventional "bugologist" of fiction and the comic strip. He wore thick-lensed glasses and carried a net. There all similarity ceased.

Of medium height, Landis had a broad, high forehead crowned with a shock of thick white hair. His mouth was like June's, firm and even stubborn, but quirked at the corners by a saving sense of humor. His khaki trousers were tucked into heavy boots; and over his shoulder was suspended the strap of a leather collecting case.

Arm in arm they came up to the door, father and daughter. But there was a heavy frown on the butterfly hunter's face as he crossed the threshold.

"Father"—June's voice was a trifle uncertain—"I want you to meet Ranger Caleb Gill of the forest service."

"How do you do, sir! It isn't often that we have the pleasure of entertaining you busy fellows."

Landis twisted his lips into a saturnine smile of welcome.

He did not offer his hand. His quick, alert eyes, behind their heavy lenses, fixed on Gill's clothing, observing the lack of uniform. "Up this way on official business, are you?"

The ranger cast an appealing glance toward June. He hardly knew how to broach the purpose of his call without giving unintentional offense.

"You can talk that over after supper," the girl helped him out. "Mr. Gill is staying with us to-night, dad, you know."

"Perhaps I'd better not inconvenience you," Gill put in doubtfully.

"Stay, by all means!" Landis was at once the courteous host. "You can't ride these trails at night. Run along and turn your horse into the pasture. By the way—it's Buford's roan, isn't it?"

"It was."

"Was?" The older man raised his brows. "Buford always said that there wasn't money enough in the world to buy it from him."

"Well, you see—you see——"

"Father! Ranger Buford was shot, killed, down near Hannegan's Meadows last night!"

Marvin Landis gave no especial sign of surprise or emotion. His lips compressed. His eyes blinked rapidly for a moment. That was all.

"I see," he murmured grimly. "I—see! The best ranger in the San Simeon gone, but I can't say that I didn't expect it. We shall have something to talk over this evening, young man!"

Gill was willing enough to delay the delicate discussion. For one thing, he wanted a chance to sort over his first

impressions of his host. Landis, the recluse, was a type totally new to his experience. If he were "loony," as Norton had described him, certainly his manner and conversation betrayed no such ailment.

He might be unemotional and cold, undoubtedly was, but he seemed to have grasped the essentials of this suddenly projected situation with rare understanding. And he had been cordial enough, even without considering the wrongs, real or fancied, that he had suffered from the forest service.

Excusing himself, the ranger rode his horse down to the fenced meadow some distance from the cabin, and turned him loose in the fine pasturage. When he returned, supper was waiting on the table; steaming vegetables and smoke-cured mountain ham. By tacit agrement, no mention was made of official business. Landis deftly kept the conversation going, however.

"I don't suppose that you've met many of the other settlers yet, have you?" he asked, as they sat down.

"Only a couple of the Barstows—Eli and the stage driver." Gill shrugged. "Between ourselves, I can't say that I was much impressed."

"They're interbred morons!" the older man pronounced a vehement judgment. "Renegades even to their own poor code of right and wrong. Did you ever happen to notice Eli Barstow's trigger finger?"

"Amputated, isn't it?"

"Precisely! And oddly enough, three others of the Barstow clan are similarly maimed. Mementoes of their last feud days in the Big Smokies—so I've been given to understand!

"Rather subtle of some one, eh, marking them like that with an everlasting brand of cowardice and defeat? So they emigrated out here to make their stump whisky and pick new fights. They've been successful in both endeavors," Landis added dryly.

"You've had trouble with them?" Gill asked.

"Well, I can't say that there is any particular love lost between us. Their kinsmen down below here on Wolf Creek—the Crawfords—have a way of borrowing sometimes without asking permission. And I always keep a shotgun loaded with buckshot beside my bed, just to be prepared for any little disturbance around the hencoop."

"But surely," Gill protested, "you wouldn't shoot a man—with buckshot! —just for stealing chickens."

"Wouldn't I though!" Landis clamped shut his jaw. His eyes became bleak and cold as fragments of black volcanic glass glittering on Spindle Top. "Young man, pardon me if I offer you a bit of advice garnered from experience. This is a serious country.

"Mercy, here, is regarded as a sign of weakness. Dog eat dog is the custom in the San Simeon. So don't ever bluff. If you threaten a man with your fist, knock him out! If you draw, shoot to kill! If you're licked, get out! I learned that too late. My life here has been—hell—ever since!"

Marvin Landis turned to his supper with a preoccupation that forbade questioning. His daughter and the ranger carried on little flashes of forced conversation, but for the most part they too remained silent. June glanced furtively at her father from time to time, plainly frightened by his somber mien. She ate little. Her plate remained practically untouched when the table was cleared.

"Mr. Gill and I will have a smoke and a chat while you're doing the dishes, dear," Landis told her then. "You won't mind leaving us alone together for a few minutes, will you?"

"Of course not." June turned away quickly, avoiding Gill's eyes. A lonesome, pathetic little figure, yet proud and uncomplaining in an exile life on Spindle Top, she passed out into the

kitchen. Nineteen, perhaps, she knew the heartache and strife of an ordinary lifetime. Yet the ranger sensed that she would have spurned his pity. And she would defend to the limit of life, he knew, one who had claim to her devotion.

Landis waited until the door had closed behind his daughter. With quick, supple fingers he rolled a cigarette. Using but one match, he lighted it, a kerosene mantle lamp, and a pile of pine knots in the fireplace, filling the room with their fragrant odor. Night was descending on the San Simeon.

Throughout summer, it was chill at this hour up on Spindle Top. Finally, the old man bolted all the windows of the living room, leaning against one sill for a long moment to peer out sharply into the gathering darkness. Then, abruptly, he pulled a chair up close beside the crackling fire and sat down.

"Now, Gill," he said, "tell me about poor Buford's death."

Caleb Gill told the story again, with such reservations as he deemed expedient. The older man heard him through in attentive silence.

"I came up here to see you," the ranger concluded, "because your name and one other were among Buford's last few words."

"My name—and one other. Um-hm!" Landis inhaled deeply on his cigarette. His eyes were half closed. In manner, he seemed completely at his ease. "Are you at liberty to tell what he said about me?"

"He said, in part, that you and he had had words."

"'He?' You refer to Buford?"

"Yes."

"Then it is true. Buford and I did have a squabble. At least, you might call it that. He had stumbled on some information, Heaven knows how, that concerned me rather particularly. He asked me to corroborate this. I refused, and he came out flatfooted with an accusation of cowardice.

"Somehow, it touched me in the raw. Perhaps it was his contempt, maybe just an old man's foolish pride. Anyhow, I blurted out the truth—after he had given me certain assurances. We parted hardly as friends—the forest service has persecuted me too long for any thought of that, Gill—but with mutual respect and understanding."

"Will you tell me the nature of that information?" Gill asked, pointblank.

"I will not! I immediately regretted having told Buford, even though I knew that I could rely on his discretion. Besides, he was already on the track."

"But can't you see," Gill pointed out, "that it will require something pretty definite to clear you of the suspicion of having killed Buford?"

"Suspicion!" Landis laughed sardonically. "Young man, I have been under suspicion since the first day I arrived here. That's an old story with me. It means nothing. You have merely the unsupported statement of a dying man that we had 'words.' You have no evidence against me. From the facts in hand, you couldn't so much as secure a warrant for my arrest." He smiled thinly. "I'm afraid you'll find me a hard man to stampede."

"I have no such purpose," Gill retorted warmly. "And, for that matter, I rather suspect that I know what trail to take to discover the basis of the information you gave to Buford."

The ranger was so boyishly blunt and straightforward about it; and he hadn't the least idea of dissimulation. It quite amused Marvin Landis to find those unusual traits in a man hunter.

"And what trail would you take?" he asked, smiling.

Gill bent forward in his chair. He had been doing some pretty intensive thinking in the last few minutes. His reply was not altogether at random.

"To Dave Sloper's mill!"

The tolerant smile left Landis' lips. His eyes became blank of expression, but not before they had mirrored briefly a haunting fear. That, however, gave way to a quick, unbridled fury.

"A ranger's promise!" he spat out. "Buford gave me his sacred oath to protect my name!"

"Buford was dying!" Gill interjected quietly. "Moreover, he revealed nothing. He merely gasped out Dave Sloper's name in connection with yours. I drew my own conclusions to-night, from little things you said.

"I'll have to follow this blind lead to Sloper. That is my duty. But I shall hold myself bound by Buford's oath to protect your name in that one circumstance—even from Supervisor Norton, who suspects nothing there."

"But supposing Eli Barstow heard, too?"

"That's possible, but I doubt it."

Landis stood up and began to pace the floor. His face was a battleground of emotions. At times he appeared on the verge of making some revelation. He was patently in an agony of indecision. But doubt and fear finally triumphed. Abruptly, he came to a stop facing the ranger.

"I can't confide in you, Gill—not now," he said. "I did that once. And once too often! But if Eli Barstow heard, I'll know—soon. And I'll come to you. I'll tell everything I know because I'll need your help." He paused. "You've played square with me, boy. I'm going to do one thing in return, at the risk of my life. It's this: Wherever your search may lead, look out for the Barstows and Dave Sloper! For the present, that's all I have to say."

To be continued in the following issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, dated and on the news stands February 15th.

WHEN UNDER WATER

NO matter how calm and peaceful a deep-sea diver may be on ordinary occasions, it is said that, when he gets into his diving dress, his disposition undergoes a remarkable change.

The air pressure it is, perhaps, that causes a patient man to become so irritable. After a glance around at the sun, the sky, the dark-blue sea, the diver's face glass is screwed on, and the air pump starts. Almost at once he remembers something that has annoyed him at some time.

As he descends, his anger increases. He is below the water, encased in his diving dress, and he can't do anything but get to work. But that little annoyance persists. The air pressure is having its effect. He thinks of more things to annoy him. His rage often becomes centered upon one man—a man he has not seen in some time, perhaps, but a man he detests heartily.

As the deep-sea diver pokes about under water, his fury mounts. He plans different ways of annihilating the man he hates. He thinks of new methods of destroying that particular person. He becomes horribly eager to remove his diving dress and get at the fellow.

It so happens, however, that this madness does not continue. Once a diver has come to the surface, and his face glass is removed, his fierce animosity immediately disappears. No matter how huge the diver's rage may be, it evaporates when he is breathing fresh air again. Often, the diver can't remember what the little annoyance was that first made him angry!

Flaming Guns

By Alfred Percy

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CRACK! Spat-t-t-g! The two sounds, practically simultaneous, whipped the calm mountain silence. From above the head of Trooper Dan Kennedy, of the West Virginia State Police, the bullet ricocheted off into space leaving only the crumbling pieces of rock it had dislodged.

Instinctively the young trooper had flattened himself against the narrow ledge. The gray of his uniform, blending with the rock, and a fringe of scrub brush were his only protection from the sight of the hidden gunman.

Kennedy had been in France during the war. He had gone over the top, hurled hand grenades, and jabbed bayonets with the best of them. Like a lot of soldiers, he had been afraid. Unlike a lot of them, he had admitted it. But at the present time he was more afraid than he had ever been before.

There was something uncanny about being shot at from Heaven-knew-where. A sniper might pick you off from some point at your rear—you being incapable of seeing out of the back of your head, or revolving it like an owl.

This, however, was the law of the hills—a law that the judicial folk found very hard to remedy, and costly both in money and men.

The people who created this law had not marched abreast of the times. They desired to be strictly let alone. Not understanding the reasons for outside interference, the mountaineers shot first and then—did not even talk afterward. They disappeared.

Before ordering him to start for Death's Head Mountain, Captain Morris, of the State Police, had called Kennedy to his office.

"Kennedy," the veteran trooper said, "orders are in to take Lem Carter. He's wanted in Jersey for murder. After the war he left off shooting his country's enemies, and began getting careless with the lives of her beloved citizens.

"Things got too warm for him elsewhere, so he came back here to the mountains where he was born and raised. He succeeded, finally, in making the rest of the Carter family lay off feud flames, and had them fire up the still boilers instead.

"He has a tough gang up there at the head of Black Snake Creek. Prac-

tically every raid in that locality has been a failure. The mountains are so chopped up that men can hide easily and shoot from cover. They have already killed or wounded several officers.

"You know the mountains, Kennedy, and with the description of Carter, you ought to be able to work it out. He is reported to have an unusually vivid scar, disfiguring the right side of his face. Go up there and bring that man back here—alive, if possible. If you don't get him, give me a mighty good explanation."

Captain Morris' eyes twinkled, then grew grave as he added thoughtfully: "We hope to be able to follow and back you up, but I'm not sure it's possible. You must make out for yourself. Remember, and keep under cover. Those guys are good shots."

Young Kennedy examined his equipment and set out to obey his orders.

After that first shot the young trooper realized that a real mountain marksman had spotted him. He thought fast. In arriving at this ledge, he had dashed across an open space to gain a covering of scrub pine a little up the slope of the ravine below him.

Kennedy cursed his luck, for had he remained in that covering instead of climbing up to the little ledge, the gunman, seeing nothing further, would have gone his way. The trooper's one chance now was swift action, before he was stormed by other hillmen attracted by the shot.

Two more bullets smacked the surface of the rock, sending up little cluster clouds of dust. The hidden marksman's aim was getting better.

II.

OUTCROPPING rock and another covering of brush lay ahead of Kennedy. Into this scant protection, the trooper made with all speed.

As he did so, other shots rapped out. He felt a sudden jolt which all but threw him on his face against the hillside. There followed a sharp pain in his shoulder and a numbness in his left arm.

"They got me, damn 'em!" he muttered bitterly, as he looked at his reddened, useless arm. "I guess I got to fight it out handicapped."

The fusillade kept up. By the way the bullets struck the rock and trees, the trooper could tell that there were more than one sniper. They were gradually working around the opposite slope in an effort to shoot him out of his meager hiding place.

Kennedy felt like a cornered rat, seeking a hole of safety that wasn't to be found. He must hunt another protected spot on the rugged, sparcely covered slope of the mountain.

Near at hand were brush thickets which offered something of a shield from the sharp eyes of his enemies. He could not hide in them. They would be the very next places the outlaws would scatter their stinging lead.

Slowly he worked his way up the hillside, where the trees and thickets were fewer, but the shadows of the overhanging rocks were deeper.

His wounded shoulder was causing him agony. When he reached the shadows he could only gasp, and stifle the desire to moan aloud.

Finally, however, he was able to control his pain-racked muscles enough to prop his back against the rock. Here he could glimpse something of the ravine through the branches of the dwarfed and gnarled trees.

A slight movement on the edge of the little clearing below caught his attention. Instinctively he raised his .45. A rangy-looking man, in faded overalls, darted into the open, a rifle in his hand. Kennedy steadied himself as best he could and fired.

The man dropped to the ground, his rifle falling with a clatter. Before the trooper could raise his unsteady arm for

a second shot, the man crawled into the bushes, wounded though he was.

"Hell! I didn't get him solid," Kennedy groaned, his lips twitching in pain. "Well, one thing, he didn't stop to get his gun," he added.

The trooper did not tarry. He moved away from the spot as fast as his torn shoulder would let him.

Shortly afterward, several shots plugged the ground where he had been. Then all firing suddenly ceased.

The trooper knew that now the time had come for the watchful-waiting game. The side with the most patience would win out. Kennedy reasoned that by now the mountaineers were certain that there was only one intruder in the hills. They would hunt for that man.

A little above him was a niche in the side of the steeper part of the slope, that seemed to afford him fair protection. Again he felt the desperation of a cornered rat. In the place he now attempted to go, a sniper would have to be very high up on the mountainside opposite to get a good shot at him.

Laboriously he pulled his body up, by gripping crevasses with his good right hand and stumbling for support with his lagging feet. At last he raised his head until his eyes were level with the floor of the niche.

Kennedy was like a man turned to granite, so great was his surprise at what he saw before him. There in the niche lay a man. The distance that separated them was barely five feet.

The right side of the stranger's begrimed and unshaven face was marred by a vivid purple scar that spread in a ghastly hook from above his eye to the corner of his mouth. This was the face of Lem Carter.

Even now that face was made more horrible as the green-glinting eyes stared back at Kennedy. The face with the scar twisted into a ghoulish leer. The two men stared, facing each other.

The trooper remained motionless, until a barely perceptible movement on the part of the other man acted as a stimulant to his fascinated imagination. Carter's finger was slowly squeezing upon the trigger of a death-spelling shotgun pointed straight at Kennedy.

The trooper threw himself to the ground. The roar of the gun broke the still air, scattering shot fanwise—sweeping off Kennedy's cap as though it was a straw in a cyclone. The charge had come that close to being his death.

Gripping his automatic, he gazed upward. He could think of no plan of action. He heard a scratching sound. A man was crawling or slowly dragging his body over a gravel surface.

"I guess he thinks he bumped me!" Kennedy muttered to himself, as he slipped the safety catch on his gun.

The wounded man gathered his remaining strength—bunched his legs under him and sprang erect with the speed of a cannon ball. Carter, upon seeing him, made an attempt to swing his gun in line. His position was awkward. He couldn't move fast enough.

The trooper's gun spat fire three times. Lem Carter sank into gravelly dirt in which he had been crawling, twitched convulsively, and lay still.

Watching warily, Kennedy dragged himself into the niche. Carter did not move. Eyes alert, ready for anything, the trooper waited. He feared that he would be rushed by other outlaws.

Soon he heard voices shouting his name. They were familiar voices, and growing nearer.

He cried out feebly. In answer to the cry, Captain Morris appeared.

"We've captured the rest, Kennedy. Did you round up Carter?"

Kennedy mutely pointed to the body of Carter. "I couldn't get him alive."

"That's all right," said Captain Morris, giving first aid to the wounded officer. "You got him, and that's better than any explanation, no matter how good it is."

A TALK WITH YOU

News and Views by the Editor and Readers

FEBRUARY 1, 1928.

You'll find, at the end of this department, an advertisement of the contents of our next issue. Glance at it now—then tell your news dealer to put aside a copy of it for you.

THERE'S nothing that brings out a man's real quality quite as well as an honestly sincere enemy. One good thing about knowing some one you don't like is that he keeps you on your toes, fighting.

If you have an enemy—and some of us have one, but don't suspect it—his opinion of you is far from complimentary. He doesn't think you amount to much. He believes you're wrong in most of your opinions.

Such an enemy is really valuable. He's worth as much time and attention as your best friend. You should go out of your way to learn his thoughts.

Nine times out of ten, you'll find that your enemy is a man of strong convictions. He's a person of character. Instead of taking you at your estimate, he's looked you over for himself.

And he's come to his own conclusions regarding you. His judgment is the result of observation and some pondering. If he really is an honestly sincere enemy, he must have his reasons for being one.

Those reasons may not be well founded. They may be drawn from misunderstandings, from gossip, from things half seen, from words misconstrued. But if he's a first-class enemy, he'll have his reasons.

NONE of the men who have taken a vital part in American affairs have been without sincere enemies. It takes a man of real worth to arouse intense hatred or admiration. Washington had his critics. He was called a "rebel." He was censured severely, by some people, for keeping up a losing fight. His aims were considered silly, stupid, visionary—by his enemies.

Now, Washington's birthday is celebrated. He is called a "patriot." His courage and intelligence are praised. The aims for which he struggled are now thought wise.

His enemies are forgotten.

Even more violent than Washington's enemies were those who opposed Lincoln. There were stormy cabinet meetings, when agreement seemed impossible. Newspapers assailed him. Inefficiency interfered with his plans.

Lincoln was subjected to fierce and ruthless criticism. His peculiarities of speech and manner were held up to ridicule. To the strain and stress of war was added the connivings of those who hated him.

These two men, whose birthdays come in February, were unlike in many ways. One was an aristocrat; the other came from poor and humble surroundings. One owned slaves; the other was against slavery. But both were alike in that they had enemies. And they were alike in that they were men of real worth.

IF you have an enemy—which is possible, even if you don't know he is one—discover how strong is his hatred. If his feeling is merely a mild annoyance, he's worth while. Find out what causes this annoyance—and you've found out something about yourself. For this trait, or trick of speech, or

whatever it is that annoys him, may be one that *you* dislike. Learning of it, you can quit it.

And if you find that his hatred is intense—step warily until you get to the reason. An honestly sincere enemy, one who knows you well, is very much worth while. He'll keep you busy, keep you fighting, keep you alive and alert.

Proving to him that he's wrong, that you do amount to something in this world, that your opinions *are* good, are incentives to action. "Showing up" an honestly sincere enemy is one of the most satisfying things in life.

Try it, and see!

Picks the Best

DEAR EDITOR: Here's my pick of the stories that appeared in "our magazine" during the last year:

"The Voice of Doom," by Roland Ashford Phillips.

"Ribbons of Light," by Erle Stanley Gardner.

"The Blue Mandarin," by William Wallace Cook.

"Don Coyote," by Whitman Chambers.

"Strike Four," by Burt L. Standish.

"False Face," by Albert M. Treynor.

"The Gift," by Vic Whitman.

"Red Boy," by Reg Dinsmore.

Now, sir, I claim that these stories are the best of all that were published in "our magazine" in 1927. They're worthy of being printed in any publication. They're first class in every respect. For entertainment, variety, interest and pep, they're unbeatable! Do you agree? Very truly yours,

T. S. BROWN.

New Orleans, Louisiana.

(That's a very good list, Mr. Brown. Several of our favorite stories appear there. But haven't you left out some good ones? How about it, readers? What's your list of "The Best Stories That Appeared in Our Magazine in 1927?" We're interested.—ED.)

Likes Moccasin Charley

DEAR EDITOR: I particularly enjoy the stories about Indian Charley in "our magazine." Are we going to get some more of them? A. BRANSON.

Burlingame, California.

(Yes, there'll be more. How do you like the stories in this issue?—ED.)

Admires the Human Fly

DEAR EDITOR: Though I've only been a reader of your publication for three years, I think I've followed it long enough to have a say. I think it's the best ever!

I like Westerns, football and basket-ball stories. Also, I enjoy the adventure stories. My favorite fiction characters are Eric Carver and "Speed" Dash.

Hoping you continue to print more about these two characters.

Your faithful reader,

WALLACE WILLIAMS.

Baltimore, Maryland.

(There's a Speed Dash story in this issue for you and all his admirers. Is it as good as previous stories about Speed?—ED.)

How It Happened

DEAR EDITOR: No doubt you have heard of the baseball park of the Boston National League Baseball Club, which is known as the "Braves Field," and its slogan, which is "The Home of Big Things." Well, that slogan is O. K., for I owe my introduction to the best fiction magazine—"our magazine"—to Braves Field.

It was some years back. I had been watching one of the big-league games. On leaving, my attention was directed to a magazine some one had left on one of the seats. I took it home with me, read it, and—I haven't missed a single issue since that day.

I have just finished reading "The Gift," by Vic Whitman, a story about fire fighters. It is the very kind of story I have been wanting to see for years and years. There are wonderful chances for heroism and romance in the lives of fire fighters, and I'm glad to see that this is realized by one of your authors, and that you're printing his stories. Give us more yarns about fire fighters! Yours very truly,

FRANK A. DUFFIE.

Cambridge, Massachusetts.

(Since your letter was written, other stories about firemen have appeared in

this magazine. Did you like them, also?—Ed.)

Setting a Record

Dear Editor: Here's my record, and it's one for other old-timers to ponder! About thirty-five years ago, there was a weekly publication written by Burt L. Standish. It drifted into another magazine—"our magazine"—and during those thirty-five years I have not failed to read every issue, although at times I have had to order back numbers in order to catch up. How's that?

In all these years, I have never read a story which could possibly hurt or harm any one—which is a sincere compliment to your firm of publishers.

Thanks for giving me many happy, pleasant hours of reading. Your friend,

C. C. Rushing.

Jackson, Mississippi.

(Your record will stand for a long time, we prophesy, Mr. Rushing. —Ed.)

Mentions His Favorites

Dear Editor: The old saying, "variety is the spice of life," explains why "our magazine" is so popular. I have never read any other magazine that has as great a variety of stories.

I only started reading it six months ago, but I have already interested three of my friends in this magazine, and they all like it very much.

Gardner, Standish, Chambers and Cook are a few of my favorites—the stories about Moccasin Charley are also very good. I like all the sport stories, especially about football and baseball.

Wishing you continued success,

Henry Borger.

Westwood, New Jersey.

(Your favorite authors will continue to appear in this publication. Watch the ads at the end of this department. —Ed.)

Took Him Ten Years

Dear Editor: It has taken me just ten years to write this letter to you, thanking you for your good magazine. I first read it in the first part of the Big Fracas, in '17. I believe the issue I got hold of was of the vintage of 1913—a little old, but that didn't spoil it at all. Keep up the good work.

Yours truly,

A. Bischoff.

San Francisco, California.

(Thanks for your letter—but don't wait ten years before writing again! —Ed.)

The February 15th issue of Top-Notch will contain

A Complete Western Novel

BLAZING SIX-GUNS, by H. H. Stinson

Strange adventures and sudden shots in a deserted mining town.

A Gripping Novelette

BULLET JOE, GOALIE, by Harold Sherman

The story of a veteran hockey player who came back mid the ring of skates and the clash of sticks.

Of Maisie, the flippant stenographer, we shall read more in

ALL IS NOT WASTED THAT LEAKS, by Nell Martin

This story was unavoidably left out of the current issue of this magazine.

Those who like the moan of jazz saxophones and clattering of traps will be interested in

AT DAWNING, by Vic Whitman

A story of a dance-band player.

Then, too, will be found "Fire at Will!" a war story of a dog, by John B. Bellenger, Jr., and other short stories as well as the conclusion of the serial "Hands Up!" by Albert M. Treynor; and another installment of the forest-ranger novel, "The Light Burners," by John Mersereau.

Sore throat while you wait

Working in stuffy quarters sleeping in over-heated homes, mingling with crowds and using appliances that others constantly use, people run an almost constant risk of a cold or sore throat—or worse.

At the first sign of either, use Listerine, the safe antiseptic, full strength. Gargle with it repeatedly. Rinse your mouth with it. Employ it occasionally as a nasal douche.

These simple measures may be the means of sparing you a trying—and possibly—a costly and painful siege of illness. In thousands of homes Listerine has checked colds and sore throats before they had a chance to become serious.

Being antiseptic, Listerine immediately attacks the countless disease-producing bacteria that lodge in the nose, mouth, and throat waiting until body resistance is low to strike.

Remember that while you are thus helping Nature ward off disease, you are also putting yourself on the polite side socially, for Listerine, as you know, ends halitosis (unpleasant breath). Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

Do something about it

LISTERINE

-the safe antiseptic

New Liquid Kills Germs That Cause Dandruff And Falling Hair

STOP worrying about hair troubles—dandruff, falling hair, approaching baldness! Here is a new kind of liquid, hermetically sealed in vials, that is ending dandruff and falling hair, and growing new hair for thousands everywhere.

This new treatment, perfected by the Allied Merke Institutes, Inc., Fifth Avenue, New York, is based on countless experiments which prove that in an enormous number of cases hair troubles are caused by tiny parasitical germs.

These germs work down into the roots of the hair and render them dormant—inactive. As a result, with the roots unable to supply their vital nourishment, the hair soon becomes dry, brittle, lifeless—and begins to fall out.

Ordinary treatments fail because they merely treat the surface skin and have little or no effect on the harmful bacteria embedded below the surface. But this new treatment, called Merke Derma Vials, penetrates *beneath* the surface—kills the infecting germs—carries off the unhealthy scaly substances which cause dandruff and falling hair—at the same time promoting a healthy circulation which supplies the dormant hair roots with the life-giving nourishment they so sorely need.

Extensive laboratory tests by one of the world's foremost research laboratories concluded with a report from which we quote: "The results indicate that the tonic *killed* the test organism (bacteria) *in less than three minutes*. The results also indicate that the tonic is capable of penetrating and preventing the growth of the test organism (bacteria)."

FREE—One regular 25-cent vial

Thousands of people from coast to coast are discovering Merke Derma Vials—the secret of new, lustrous, healthy hair. Now we welcome this convincing test. Simply take advantage of our generous free offer explained in the panel above, use Merke Derma Vial liquid yourself and see how remarkably helpful it is in ending dandruff and falling hair. Sign and mail coupon TODAY. Allied Merke Institutes, Inc., Dept. D-422, 512 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

Allied Merke Institutes, Inc.,
Dept. D-422, 512 Fifth Avenue,
New York City

I'm willing to be convinced—without obligation on my part. Please send me one of the regular 25c Merke Derma Vials absolutely FREE and tell me how to use it.

Name .....

Address .....

City .....State .....

Camel

The cigarette that leads by billions

Just to state a great truth in another way—Camel is so exactly what so many smokers want that no other brand is even a close second.

If all cigarettes were as good as Camel you wouldn't hear anything about special treatments to make cigarettes good for the throat. Nothing takes the place of choice tobaccos.