

# PEOPLE'S *Story Magazine*

NOV. 25, 1922

20 CENTS

*A Big Serial*  
"The Wagon Wheel"

by  
William Patterson White

"The Misfit Man"

by  
Fred R. Buckley





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# PEOPLE'S Story Magazine

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November 25, 1922

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**TRY THIS NUMBER!**

# PEOPLE'S Story Magazine

Vol. XL

NOVEMBER 25, 1922

No. 3

## The Redheads

A Complete Novel

by Captain  
Dingle



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A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN THE DUTCH EAST INDIES. "RED" SAUNDERS, FIGHTING SKIPPER, WAS KNOWN ALL OVER THE ISLANDS. HE HIT SUMATRA—AND MET UP WITH BEAUCHAMP. . . . .

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### CHAPTER I.

LEAVING the office of the third greatest merchant of Palembang, Kenneth Beauclerc Saunders stood for a moment just outside the door. He was mad clear through, and showed it as much as he ever showed anger, by assuming a smile of ultra-sunniness toward all the world.

Saunders stood six feet and an inch above the ground; built on corresponding lines he possessed a vital, radiating personality which did not stop short at sheer manly beauty of face and figure; his thick, wavy hair was, to put it mildly, auburn. As "Red" Saunders he

was known from Comorin to Calcutta, and from Canton to the Cape, while a hundred tiny island ports had offered snug anchorage at times to his trim, fast schooner, the *Black Pearl*.

It is not to be thought for one moment that the red-headed sailor-trader had honored the third greatest merchant in Palembang with a first, original call. Saunders dealt at all times with the greatest in everything. That he now found it necessary to treat with lesser fry was due to causes which at last led to the results with which this tale is concerned. He had already visited that morning the two first merchants in the

town; his reception at the office of the man of third importance had been so entirely similar to that experienced twice before within half an hour, that, for once in his active life, he was brought to a temporary halt. There was no freight for him; no business calling for the employment of a swift, stanch schooner.

"Mynheer, there is nothing. Trade is not good," he was told, in just so many words, at three offices. At the first, not descending to chaffer, he had simply left without comment. At the second, slightly irritated by the repetition of the unsatisfactory answer to his inquiry, he had asked for a better reason. He knew that the ports of Sumatra were never busier. He had just returned from Colombo, to which port he had freighted a full hold of dyewoods and gutta-percha with the promise of more cargoes to come; and on the sixty-mile passage of the river from the sea to the port of Palembang the stream was dotted with inward and outward craft, the outward-bounders deeper of loadline than the incoming ships. Yet he was hearing nothing but lugubrious tales of poor trade.

"Trade is very good," he asserted, with a dawning smile, to the second merchant. "My schooner is fast, well found, and safe. I want a cargo; anything, to anywhere."

"I am sorry, mynheer. If one has no goods, one cannot give out cargo."

Saunders peeped into the warehouse as he left this second distressed merchant's office. It was choked with bags of sago, bundles of rattans, copra, gum, and spices. Native carts filled the streets with loads of rubber, coffee, and rice, either going to fill to further overflowing the warehouses, or to gorge the holds of waiting vessels in the river. But for the *Black Pearl*, nothing.

At the third office he had listened to the tale of woe again, but had made no

comment inside. His smile grew more sunny, however, and when he stood outside the building it broke into a veritable summer glow; sure sign of rising anger.

In his lengthy career of free-lance trading to all the ports in the eastern and southern seas, he had at times stepped on the corns of authority, petty and august, as witness the tilt with the Commissioner of the Andamans, the defiance and defeat of the Sultan of Zanzibar, the utter discomfiture of a high and mighty official in Mombasa; but never had he expected to be compelled to take up arms, even figuratively, against the stolid merchants of Dutch Sumatra. Now he suspected that some unseen influence was working to drive him away from a profitable port, and he was not the man to be driven.

With his bronzed face glowing, and only the suspicion of a glint in his kindly gray eyes, he turned back, swung down past the customhouse, and entered the office of the British consul.

"Billy Runacres," he said with exaggerated gravity, "you just loosen up and explain to me why Sumatra has suddenly ceased shipping cargoes out."

The consul, young, ambitious, but not so overwhelmed by his sense of importance as to have lost his human attributes, grinned cheerfully up into the strong face of his friend.

"Did you ever hear that story of the monocled tenderfoot in the Western mining camp, Red?" he replied, with apparent irrelevancy. "Let's see, it goes something like this——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Saunders, patiently. "They chucked him out of the dance hall, and he came back, once, twice, thrice. Then they pitched him out on his ear, without much clothes left, and the rim of his monocle without a glass, stuck fast in his teeth. Gradually dawned on him that they perhaps didn't want his company, didn't it?"

"Correct. Well?"

"I see," smiled the big sailor genially. "So you think I am in bad odor, hey? Then why?"

"How in creation do I know?" demanded Runacres, a little sharply. "I'm a kid compared with you, but I've heard from fellows around here that you had a habit at one time of sailing very close to the legal wind without getting taken aback, for the sheer sport of worrying these eastern officials. How do I know what you've been up to lately, Saunders? You may have kidnaped some fat old Dutchman and made him shiver himself to a damp shadow by continually sharpening a butcher knife in front of him, for all I know. You'd do that if any of these obese traders had ever cheated a pal of yours out of a guilder, I'm certain."

Saunders laughed softly, a reminiscent look in his twinkling eyes, and assured Runacres that he had been up to no such tricks during the past year at least.

"I've too much at stake, now, Billy," he said. "And I've enough at stake, too, to make me unwilling to pull out of any port where I know my slate is clean. I want a cargo. I can't get one. If you can't do anything, I'll have to make a turnover in some other way, legitimate of course."

"I'll see what can be done," the consul said, with a grin. "Don't happen to recall a Dutch chap named Zimmerman in Zanzibar, do you?"

"Dutch Zim? I knew there was a beach-combing rascal by that name down there during the bombardment," replied Saunders musingly. "He tried to recall the man, but could only see him hazily as a bit of flotsam of the Seven Seas cast up on the Zanzibar beach during stirring times down there. 'A regular drifter, as I remember. What can he have to do with me?'"

"I don't know. But I do know that he was here a week before you came back from Ceylon, asking about your

schooner; and that immediately after his visit all my Dutch merchant club fellows seemed to suddenly cool toward me. As you are about the only itinerant Britisher trading here at present, and I happen to be consul under your flag, there may be something in it. Come in after lunch, say about three o'clock."

Saunders spent the waiting time in making some necessary purchases of stores for the schooner. The town was full of seamen of all nationalities, the streets had all the appearance of set scenes in some gorgeous extravaganza of the stage. Among such a crowd any ordinary man might well pass unnoticed; but Saunders boasted eyes which gave him the fullest service, and when he thought he saw over the heads of the intervening throng the bulky form of Dan Mallet, his mates he knew he was not mistaken. But to reach him was far more difficult than simply to see him, as a brief attempt to cross the street convinced him. Before he had reached the middle of the jostling crowd, Mallet was gone.

"That's your one-voyage mate for you!" Red grinned unpleasantly. "Lord send old Tod Carter out of hospital soon!"

Tod Carter had been left ashore the previous voyage in order that sundry hurts, sustained in asserting his skipper's prestige against a gang of alcoholic traducers, might be healed. For want of better, Dan Mallet had been shipped for the time being; and Saunders had just seen a specimen of his sense of duty. As soon as the skipper's broad back was turned, the mate, who should have found plenty for himself and the crew to do until five o'clock, must be off on a premature shore jaunt.

"We'll have a little chat presently, Mister Mallet," Saunders muttered to himself as he turned in at the consul's office to hear the result of Billy Runacres' quest.

"Hullo, Red, old man," was Billy's forced greeting. "I can't do a thing for you. Sorry. You are ab-so-lute-ly defunct, dead, and snuffed out, so far as Palembang trade is concerned."

"Don't I know it?" growled the skipper. "I wanted you to find out why. There must be a reason."

"There is, naturally. I have not found it, though. All the reply I can get is simply that there is no trade going out suitable for your capacity and style of craft."

"But that's rot! Do these stodgy fools of half-baked Dutchmen think they can brush me aside with any such smug lie as that? By thunder, Runacres! I'll——"

"You won't do anything so mad, old chap," smiled the consul, knowing perfectly well to what lengths the skipper might easily go in anger. "You have others to think of besides yourself, old hot-head. Take a couple of days off and try then. Take Jess out and show her around a bit. Mrs. Runacres would be very glad to have you pay us a visit. No need to speak about my own feelings, is there?"

Saunders regained his cheery poise. Gripping Runacres by the hand he smiled.

"Thank you, Billy. You're the same good old scout as ever. I'll take a cooler and think it all over again. And I'll tell Jess about your invitation. She'll want to take it up, I can promise you. So long."

On the way down to the schooner Saunders felt himself falling back into the dark mood of the morning; and his mood was not lightened when he stepped into his boat and saw Mallet at the schooner's rail gazing shoreward as if he had never been out of the ship. With his characteristic directness, the skipper lost no time in stepping on board.

"Mallet, you're fired," he said, crisply.

"Fired, cap'n?" returned the mate, uneasily. "For what?"

"For the safety of your skin and the good of the ship!"

Without a second look at Mallet, the skipper entered the cabin and went to his stateroom. The mate stood staring after him in an attitude of ludicrous bewilderment, his mouth open, his knees bent, and his long, apelike arms curved from his sides.

Saunders had forgotten all about him for the moment. He flung his hat down on the settee, ran his fingers through his wavy red hair, and glanced about the snug little chamber. His eye lighted on a note, pinned in feminine fashion to the curtain of his bunk.

DEAR: Bubbles and I have gone to visit in town. We won't return this evening, but if you want us, or me, you can find us at the Netherland Hotel. Sorry to be away when you come on board; but the truth is that Mallet has made himself very obnoxious to both of us while you were away. I hope you'll get rid of him. Tod Carter was down here for a little while, looking splendid, and said he will be ready to rejoin whenever you want him. Your own Jess. (Oh, well then, with love, Redhead—heaps of it!)

Amusement, affection, and anger struggled for expression in the skipper's face, with affection and amusement getting the decision over the third in the three-cornered duel of emotions. He could afford to ignore Mallet, since he was about to quit anyhow. But Mallet spoiled a perfectly good chance of immunity for himself by suddenly appearing, red-faced, blazing of eye, truculent of bearing.

"Hey, cap'n, what's your notion in firing me like a fo'mast nigger?" he demanded. Saunders faced him slowly, regarding him as he might regard a tame buffalo which had blundered into his parlor. Dan Mallet was no insignificant specimen of a man, either. He was an inch shorter than Saunders, but his shoulders were built on lines calling for seven feet in height, and the great



fists at the end of his powerful arms hung almost to his knees. His face was cast in a mold from which iron masks might have been made, rugged, bony, square-chinned, high of cheekbone. And now, in anger, great black bushes of eyebrows were drawn down level until they appeared as eaves overshadowing the sunken caverns of his eyes.

"Go on deck, Mallet," he said with a clear, sunny smile.

"Not me!" blustered Dan. "I'm a man, ain't I?"

"You're shaped like a human being, yes? What of it? I said go on deck."

Perhaps the absence of threat caused Mallet to undervalue Saunders as a fighting force. It may be that the gentle smile fooled him. Whatever the cause, or reason, Dan Mallet made a bad false play when he stepped boldly inside the cabin, and shook a great fist under the skipper's aquiline nose.

"I look like a man and by cripes I am a man!" he roared. "If you're man enough to——"

In after days Dan Mallet could never clearly recall what happened just prior to his finding himself lying on the deck beside the gangway. He could feel no such hurts as a smashed nose, loosened teeth, or even a plum-bruised eye; but he found, on trying to lift himself on his elbow to look around that his right arm, that reliable old right arm, was broken at the wrist. And, gradually, he was conscious of a heavy lump growing under the angle of his jaw. Then, next thing, the skipper's voice sounded close by. He looked up and met the calm gaze of Saunders, who stood regarding him curiously, manicuring his nails with a pocket-knife.

The skipper sauntered aft again, his unruffled hair gleaming in the sunlight of late afternoon, his smile vying with the daylight in soft brilliance. He met the steward coming out of the cabin with Mallet's belongings.

"Here, Betel Bob," he said, handing the grinning Fijian a purse; "you see Mister Mallet snug in hospital, and pay the sawbones for a complete repair, private room, if there is one. You needn't tell Mallet his bill is paid, and you needn't tell the sawbones who's paying it, understand? And if the sick fellow cuts up any didoes on the way, just kick him on the bump under his jaw. That'll last him until you get him to moorings."

## CHAPTER II.

THE dilemma which had suddenly involved him occupied the skipper for some hours after Dan Mallet was taken ashore. He sat in his cabin, at a littered desk, trying to thrash out a plan to follow, something to employ his vessel and bring ever-needed grist to the financial mill. From where he sat he faced a heavy solid silver photo frame, in which was a picture.

It was the likeness of a girl, of some twenty years or so, a merrily smiling, fluffy haired, dimpled girl with the mysterious charm of adolescence and the mature fascination of a grown woman untouched by the world, yet fully aware of the good and evil of it. This was Jess; and if ever his mind dwelt too long upon some proposition calling for the old-time close-hauled sailing, one glance at Jess' pictured face sufficed him to swing his mental bark broad off the wind and 'ware shoals.

He called the steward when he heard him return, and ate a thick sandwich of bread and buffalo beef; then, changing his clothes, he went ashore to try to find relaxation before going up to meet the girls.

Out of the eddying swarms of the wharves, which gave the lie again and again to those merchants who had pleaded no trade for him, Saunders passed through a section of the town where the Dutch resident, the foreign

traveling agent, and the transient mariner seemed to forgo that. And all seemed to be bound in the same direction. Past club and hotel, giving but a glance in at the theater doors, the white-clad stream of Europeans ever grew in volume, never a man turned from the path once he had found it.

Curiosity sent Saunders into the line, and held him there, for nothing in the way of orthodox amusement that he knew of in Palembang had power enough to draw such a crowd. It was in the thinly populated quarter north of the town, near by the newest oil wells, that the stream of pleasure seekers was halted to change from a current to a lake of patience. It was half an hour before Saunders reached a small wicket, through which tickets were handed in exchange for gold; and past which the crowd were admitted two by two into a dingy, malodorous barn. And pasted on the wooden wall beside the ticket window was a glaring poster depicting two all but naked pugilists in attitudes of gentlemanly slaughter to be done with gloves.

**GRAND**  
**CHAMPIONSHIP FIGHT TO-NIGHT!**  
Contest for the  
**Heavy Weight Championship of the East**  
**Indies and a Purse of 1,000 Guilders**  
**Red BEAUCHAMP**  
**vs.**  
**Dan MALLET**

It was Mallet's name, unexpectedly leaping out at him from the poster, which first brought a grin to the skipper's face. His long wait in the line had increased the irritation of the day's happenings, until, on arrival at the wicket, he was more fit to partake of a fight than to watch one. He laughed outright, and paused before the window, withholding his money, and keeping back the entire line. Then a glittering figure of soaped hair and glass diamonds, with a screaming suit of Petti-

coat Lane clothes, bustled through the impatient throng and caught the skipper's arm.

"Keep movin', buddy," he gargled; "if yuh don't wanna see a good fight, don't stop others."

Saunders slapped the man's hand aside easily, and gave him one swift, indifferent look. The fellow was of a type utterly obnoxious to him; a greasy, mouthy showman, with mourning edging to his finger nails and a crooked twist to his lips not by any means due alone to the muscular effort needed to sustain the great black cheroot with which he polluted the already fetid air. There was something vaguely familiar, too, about the man, but so vague that Saunders felt certain the familiarity was only impersonal, that he had never met the man actually or had dealings with him. But the crowded passageway behind was noisy with demands for movement, and even the skipper's hard, sinewy, weighty frame could not longer hold back the pressure. The flashy showman tried again to remove the obstruction.

"Say, cap'n, let the boys through, won't yuh? What's up with the show that yuh ain't goin' in yerself?"

"There won't be any show," laughed Saunders, and men who had taken their tickets and passed inside, men who were in the act of buying, and a greater number waiting still, all halted in their tracks and stared at the big, cool sailor who spoke in tones of certainty. The showman glanced around in alarm, for he scented diminished receipts even if the statement proved false; already men at the rear of the line, tired of waiting, drifted away on hearing those few clear words spoken.

"Here, what yuh mean?" he barked wheezily. "Who's goin' to stop the show? Who's goin' to stop any show Dutch Zimmerman puts on, hey?"

Saunders looked at the man curiously, and the smile crept into his eyes.

"So you're Dutch Zim, are you? I wondered what sort of looking creature you were. Not so much Dutch about you as I supposed."

"Never mind me or the Dutch part, cap'n," snarled Zim. "Are you goin' to stop my show? If that's yer game, who are yuh?"

The crowd surged forward, howling now for explanations instead of tickets. From inside dribbled uneasy patrons in two minds about demanding their money back.

"I won't stop your show any more than I have already," grinned the skipper, ignoring the demand for his identity. "I came to see the scrap. But one of your men, Mallet, is in hospital with a broken arm and a fat jaw, so that's why I say the show won't go on."

"Aw, yer lyin'! Some trick o' bettin', or something."

The skipper smiled more genially, but let the lie pass for the moment.

"I'm telling you straight news," he said. "I put Dan Mallet into hospital myself, so I know."

Mention of Mallet again recalled the unsatisfactory events of the earlier day, Jess' letter, everything which had gone to pile irritation on irritation. His temper was ready to burst out, but he controlled it. He heard Zim mutter in awed tones: "Then you must be Red Saunders, by Himmel! Ain't nobody else able to put Dan in hospital!" Then, rather louder, and with a half hopeful note: "You ought to find me another man, then, cap'n. My show's spoiled if that fight don't go on, and I spent a lot o' money gettin' permission to hold this yer championship. And the army and navy big-heads are comin' in force, besides a lot o' high gazabos who can either make or bust a feller in a dozen ways. Can't yuh rake me up a sailor?"

"I'll go on myself, if you'll take the other corner," smiled the skipper. Zim flashed a suspicious glance up at him;

but Saunders gave no sign of having heard what Runacres had told him that day.

"Aw, quit foolin', Saunders," Zim grumbled uneasily. "I ain't in condition. Why don't yuh go on anyhow? There's money in it, and these big-guns here will do a lot for a good scrapper."

Red stepped inside the barn and glanced around. In the center stood the ring, elevated four feet from the uneven floor. But the interruption at the ticket window had drawn all the early comers back to the door; a scanty score of spectators watched the performance of a very gory, hit-or-miss preliminary between a pair of Malay boys. The tier of boxes, however, built along one side of the ropes, seemed to hint at something of importance coming off, later, sufficiently attractive to draw such folks as those boxes were suitable for; and there was trade to be gouged out of Palembang for the *Black Pearl's* yawning hold.

"How much is the purse in real money, Zim?"

"See the bill, don't yuh?"

"I said real money."

"The thousand guilders is real hard cash, and there's no fake about it, either. And winner takes all."

"A draw splits it?"

"Aw, there ain't goin' to be no draw! How can there in a finish fight, unless it's crooked? I don't pay on no draw!"

"I'll go on. Where's a dressing room?" Zim turned excitedly to the waiting crowd and bellowed, "Git yer tickets, lads!" then led the way past the ring to a small room beyond. As he stood aside for Saunders to enter, indicating a pair of trunks and shoes on a chair, the utterly sunny smile on the skipper's face was turned full upon him.

"Don't fergit, Red, I don't pay on no draw," he stated with fine emphasis, misreading that smile. Had he known Saunders by more than report, he would have known that nothing short

of a raging anger had impelled the auburn Adonis to take such means to work it off as filling another man's corner in a championship prize fight without a moment's preparation.

"Zim, you're windy," smiled the skipper. With a swift movement he seized the blatant showman's wrist between thumb and two fingers and drew him nearer. "Have the thousand guilders at the ringside before I step through the ropes," he said. "If a draw it is, you'll pay on a draw, little one, see?" With the word he pinched the thick wrist without apparent intention, and Zim squirmed. In any company other than that of a splendid human model such as Saunders was, Dutch Zim might have passed for at least a he-man in physique. But here he knew he was overweighted, outclassed. Without more than a scowl, he left the dressing room and Saunders prepared for the bout.

As he lounged at his door in trunks and shoes, watching the closing rounds of the last preliminary bout, he heard a cheerful laugh not far away, and a voice with a varsity accent drawled:

"What rippin' sports those chaps are, by Jove! The bally timekeeper's wangling the clock on 'em like anything."

The speaker stood in shadow, but a wall lamp beyond shed a little patch of light over part of his face and his head. The first glimpse of his visible parts drew a delighted chuckle from the skipper. The face was keen, refined, strong; a black-rimmed monocle, stuck in one eye, curiously seemed to belong there, and not to be worn for effect. But it was the hair which drew Saunders' closest attention.

"By Godfrey! If I'm Red, then that chap's Ruby!" grinned Saunders. The man's hair glistened in the kerosene flare like red paint rather than copper.

The bout in the ring was terminated suddenly, and then a hush settled over the house for a moment, to murmur and

gradually grow into a roar of expectancy.

"Main bout in the ring!" called somebody, and Red Saunders climbed through the ropes leisurely and stood in a corner, for the first time feeling a curiosity as to whom he was to meet.

Dutch Zim clambered up to the platform, and announced to the uniformed occupants of the boxes:

"A accident havin' busted up Dan Mallet, one of the principals in the main bout, the accident has agreed to take his place and meet Red Beauchamp for the championship of Sumatra an' the Dutch East Indies. Gentlemen, I don't ask indulgence fer the substitute. Red Saunders, gentlemen, is no stranger in this part o' the world. Stand up, Red!"

Saunders was still standing, smiling good-humoredly out at the crowd, seething within with the irritations of the day. He waved his gloves by their strings and retorted shortly:

"Bring on your husky tough. Don't waste wind."

He heard comments, not at all subdued, from the boxes and front seats, and knew, realizing it with a trace of the smile which was not a register of his anger, that his appearance in the ring had created something of a sensation. Then he felt rather than saw his opponent crawl through the ropes opposite, and Dutch Zim's raucous bellow told all and sundry that:

"Red Beauchamp, gents, will defend the title he gets by forfeit owim' to Dan Mallet's absence. Red Beauchamp, gents, in this corner. Fight to a finish, small gloves, Queensbury rules. Red Saunders—Red Beauchamp."

Zim ducked out, and the seconds came in to lace on the gloves; then Saunders saw who his opponent was. It was the monocled stranger with the varsity accent; and he was looking straight over at Saunders with the eye of humorous appraisal. Nobody in

Sumatra could have looked less the part of a bruiser; nobody more like a school-boy suddenly released from irksome studies and cast into a whirl of every boyish delight he had ever dreamed about. And he still wore his monocle, hung by a narrow black ribbon about his neck; wore the glass, and bubbled over with glee.

"Oh I say," he cried, shoving his handlers aside and running across the ring, "I was expecting to meet some broken-nosed bruiser, old chap. Glad you're not one. Never get much sport out of the regular pug."

Saunders met his opponent with a smile as free and a note as joyous.

"I rather expected to find that sort, too," he grinned. "Rather sorry it's you. I'm spoiling for a scrap. Business worries, and that sort of thing, y'know. I'm murderous. We'll call it off, if you like."

"Not at all," Beauchamp laughed, happily. "I've just heard some corkin' good news, and only a rousing good bout with the dukes will serve as a safety valve."

"Hey, what's the game?" roared a drunken voice from the rear seats. "Is this a brothe'ly chinnin' match, or a fight, hey? I ain't paid ten guilders to see no kissin' contest between a dude and his long-lost brother. Get busy."

His fears had no foundation. Beauchamp returned to his corner his gloves were laced on, and the referee briefly gabbled the chief rules concerning hitting in the breaks, and then the time-keeper barked:

"First round—seconds out—Time!"

The championship bout was on.

Dutch Zim left the ticket wicket and took up a stand by a corner post. And, with one eye on him and one on the fight, Billy Runacres sat in an end box, in company with two eager-faced, bright-eyed girls whose expressions of astonishment at first soon gave way to

deepest personal interest in the combatants.

"Why, my dear, he's positively handsome!" whispered Bubbles, Jess' chum.

"That's why I love him," replied Jess, absently.

"Oh, fudge! I mean the other one," was the rejoinder.

### CHAPTER III.

THAT contest started with a handshake, the warmth of which perhaps gave grounds for supposing that the championship would produce but an indifferent set-to. But once squared off, the clean-limbed, clear-eyed boxers speedily had the impatient crowd sitting breathless in their seats. Their hands had scarcely parted when Beauchamp, younger than Saunders by ten good years, led with a solid left to the eye which was countered like a streak of light. They stepped back under the almost simultaneous blows, and laughed happily, each knowing, from the weight of that initial encounter, that he faced a real opponent. Then their bodies came together with a thud, and gloves impacted against flesh with the rhythm of drum beats, making the shaky ring floor tremble again. And each punch brought an appreciative grin from the recipient, and a retort in kind.

"Scissors!" chuckled Billy Runacres, pinching the girls' elbows joyfully, "it's just like a varsity final. This'll beat anything in the professional bruiser line I ever saw."

"But aren't they hurting each other?" whispered Bubbles, wide-eyed and breathless.

"You couldn't hurt Red with gloves, and the other chap's smiling, isn't he?" returned Jess, leaning forward eagerly.

The round ended. Beauchamp laughed like a happy boy as he went to his corner, and the smile on Saunders' face had begun to change from the ultra-sunny smile of anger to that less

brilliant, softer smile of rising contentment. Jess saw the change, and sighed as if a load had been lifted from her mind.

The barn was in an uproar of excitement. Whatever had been feared when the contestants met in that unusual handshake, the first round had put it right. The spectators were getting their money's worth.

As the second round proceeded, with faster action and heavier exchanges, but with little to choose between the contestants, the betting wavered from one to the other, and when the gong sounded again, sending the men to their corners, Dutch Zim beckoned one of his hirelings and sent him to find out and report just how the betting was going from time to time.

Midway through the third round Beauchamp got in a tremendous right hook which caught the skipper coming in and sent him crashing to the floor. The betting tout reported the odds swinging toward Beauchamp, and a big wager placed on him by the governor. Saunders was on his feet, still grinning cheerfully, before three had been counted over him, and Beauchamp, stepping in to repeat, met a swing with his chin which hurled him into the opposite corner to collide with the ring post. The official face of the governor retained its outward calm; but his eyes hardened as he saw his wager in peril, and most of the calm fled in the next second when Saunders followed up his advantage and dropped Beauchamp to the floor with a right uppercut as he lurched away from the post.

The ring shook to his fall. Then the gong rang for the end of the round; time saved him; and Zim hurriedly got men to prop up the tottering posts.

The men faced each other again, and now their cheery grins were somewhat marred by dark patches around the eyes and chins; but they were enjoying the battle with all the keenness of clean,

healthy sportsmen. Beauchamp recovered swiftly from the shaking up of the round before, and his greater youth began to tell. His speed increased, while Saunders fell back upon stubborn defensive fighting which was little less deadly than his attack and called less on his reserve vitality.

This, combined with a sudden-fierce rally from Beauchamp, swung the betting odds again, and the governor's face lighted up. The tout reported to Zim the placing of another big wager. Six rounds that contest went, swaying first to one side and then to the other, and the referee would have had a hard time picking a winner on points. But in the seventh, with the official bets mounting into big money indeed, and Saunders recovering his speed and effectiveness, Dutch Zim's face grew worried; he was ever looking anxiously toward the boxes, trying to read expressions.

Runacres was watching the movements of Dutch Zim as the seventh round went on. He stood close up against the corner post that had been propped up; and the ring now shook and creaked with every movement of the men. Saunders forced a swift rally, driving Beauchamp against the ropes, and Zim flashed a glance behind the governor's box, where a sycophantic junior official was making signs. Runacres sensed something wrong, but could not place it. At the moment he felt a strong touch on his shoulder, and turned to meet Tod Carter, whose rugged, honest face was clouded by a scowl.

"Looks like a dirty play, don't it, Mr. Runacres?" Tod muttered. "Thought I'd be handy to lend a hand."

Beauchamp, caught in a corner, was rocking under the pile-driver punches of the grinning skipper, his own smeared face still wearing a smile, but his knees shaking. Across the ring, the toady behind the boxes signaled fran-

tically, and, when it seemed certain that the championship of Sumatra and the Dutch East Indies belonged to the *Black Pearl's* skipper, down crashed the ring in a cloud of dust and a tangle of ropes and posts.

Then pandemonium burst loose. The smoky, foul-aired barn rang to the rafters with the howls of chagrined gamblers and lower animals robbed of the climax to what promised to be a bloody fight. In the boxes the official patrons stared at the wreck for a moment, then began to leave their seats. Dutch Zim screamed frantically at the referee, and that bewildered functionary climbed upon the heap of planks and yelled:

"Gentlemen! All bets are off! The fight's a draw! It will be put off until a date to be set later. Thank you one and all, gents. Leave by all doors."

Runacres started down toward the ring, for Jess' shriek rang unpleasantly in his ears. But Tod Carter dragged him back.

"Stay with the ladies, Mister Runacres," growled the grim old mate. "This is my job."

He leaped over the intervening rows of benches and reached the pile of debris, out of which Saunders was trying to haul Beauchamp. Both men were scratched and bruised beyond anything the contest had done to them, and Saunders dragged a limping leg behind him which he could not yet assure himself was not broken, at least in some small bone. Beauchamp, who was under-dog at the moment of collapse, emerged looking like the victim of an earthquake.

"Here y'are, cap'n," roared Carter, plunging forward and hurling planks aside like straws. Saunders flashed a look of glad recognition to his mate, then his face hardened with an anger which was proof even against his habit of smiling in a rage.

"Carter, look after this chap," he

barked; and without waiting to see if he were obeyed he plunged out of the chaos and hurled himself upon Dutch Zim, who was prying with a corner-post at a heap of heavy beams. Saunders had not mistaken the man's deliberate intention. It meant murder or maiming if those beams fell before Beauchamp and himself were clear, and the big skipper had handled such men as Dutch Zim often before.

"Hey, hold off, Red!" bawled Zim, with a futile attempt at guarding himself from the gloved fist reaching out for him. "I'm tryin' to get yuh clear, ain't I?"

"I'll get you clear," grunted Saunders, tearing his gloves off.

"He capsized the ring, skipper!" yelled Carter, with Beauchamp's arms about his shoulders. Beauchamp hauled himself out by gripping the mate tightly, and leaped down beside Saunders, who now faced not only Zim, but both gangs of seconds and a swarm of hangers-on. Dutch Zim plucked loose his pry, and held it as a fender between him and the menacing skipper.

"Did the rotter really let us down?" demanded Beauchamp, screwing his monocle into his eye. It had flapped at his back all through the contest, fastened to his neck by the ribbon. He peered down at the scowling crook curiously. "By Jove, Dutch, I believe you're a scoundrel!" he said, and a long arm reached out and grabbed the showman by the hair. Zim shook himself free of the ineffectual grip of the gloved hand, and brandished his piece of timber.

"Boys, these guys is going to beat me up," he cried. "Put 'em outside!"

A sudden onset drove the three comrades back for a moment, and the few spectators who had loitered behind after the ring collapsed departed hurriedly. Beams and pieces of flooring whirled aloft, and Tod Carter staggered back with a smashed hat and a scraped fore-

head. Saunders snatched the club away from Carter's assailant, and drove it home in a thrust which robbed the man of breath for an hour afterwards; and in the same breath Beauchamp tore off one glove, whipped up a water bucket, and crowned Zim.

Things were not going right for Dutch Zim. Jess and Bubbles, wide-eyed spectators of this aftermath of the prize fight, found cause for mirth in the picture of the greasy showman eclipsed by a zinc pail, and their rippling laughter reached his red ears even through the muffling metal. Saunders and his friends were backing away to get their clothes, when Zim yelled something in a mongrel dialect of Dutch and Malay; and like a flood a score of men surged upon them, knives flashing.

"I say, this isn't the game, you know!" protested Beauchamp, putting the period to his protest with a straight punch from the shoulder which loosened the teeth of the foremost knifer.

"Stand aside!" shrilled a girlish voice; and Billy Runacres leaped down to the floor and ducked, yelling to Saunders and the others to follow suit. They dipped, and a pistol in Jess' steady hand began to stream bullets among the knife men. They stopped in their tracks, their hang-dog faces lost all their truculence, and they glared appealingly at Zim for advice.

"Get to your holes!" said Saunders, incisively, fixing his smiling glance upon the rabble while his long arms reached out again and grabbed Dutch Zim. Beauchamp and Tod Carter, aided now by Billy Runacres, picked up weapons and advanced; and another shot from Jess decided the riot.

"Hey, where you fellers haulin' me to?" blustered Zim, helpless in the iron grip of the seething skipper.

"Into the dressing room first, until we dress," grinned Saunders. "Then to the ticket office to get our money."

"I told yuh I wouldn't pay on no

draw! 'Twas a draw, wasn't it? Ain't that what yuh understood, Beauchamp?"

"Er, yes, I believe so," hesitated the monocled one, dropping his glass and turning an embarrassed face upon the skipper. "That was the understanding, old chap," he said.

"Then you need educating in the school of swindling, my monocled friend," derided Saunders, retaining his hold on the showman. "I understood the purse would be paid whatever the result. Because this crook capsized the works and stopped the scrap, making it a draw automatically, is no reason why he should make a thousand guilders out of us. Billy Runacres, you look after Jess and Bubbles. Unless this greasy swab produces the coin within five minutes, what'll happen to him isn't going to be nice for ladies to see."

He began dressing with a cheerful grin, and Beauchamp, feeling irresistibly drawn to this masterful mariner who so lately had tried hard to knock his head off, grinned in entire sympathy and slipped his own clothes on with none of his customary fastidious care. Tod Carter grinned in the doorway, having relieved Saunders as custodian of Zim; and the combined effect of those three strong, clean, smiling faces proved too much for the showman.

"Say, yuh damn highbinders," he snarled uneasily, "I'll pay yuh. But watch out, you Saunders; you don't get no fat thousand out o' me without a comeback! I warn yuh."

"Kick 'im inside to me, Carter," smiled Saunders, and reached out a hand like a grappling iron. Dutch Zim wilted.

"Oh, I know all about yer strong arm," he yelled. "You got the bulge now. But I've told yuh. Come on, Carter, or whatever yer name is. I'll pay."



Tod Carter took him to the ticket window, and received a bag of cash over the ledge. He demanded a count, and forced it against all protests with a pistol which looked as big as a mountain howitzer to Zim. Then he reached inside, took out the key, and locked the showman up in his own sanctum.

An hour later a merry party gathered around the table at supper in a private room in the hotel where Jess had taken rooms. Billy Runacres had adopted the smile which seemed to be common to all the rest, and the only person present who did not smile quite happily was Jess, who was not yet reconciled to seeing Red Saunders grinning through a split lip, and out of a half-closed eye and one quite shut.

Beauchamp was in little better case, but his battered appearance could not disguise the fact that he was a gentleman to the toes; and the happy, boyish enthusiasm with which he had accepted Red's appellation of Ruby endeared him to everybody.

"Don't see what else you could dub me in this company," he laughed, staring at Saunders' ruddy thatch. "I should have considered that mop of hair a decent shade of vermilion"—nodding across the table—"had I not seen both our heads together in the mirror. Mine is rather vivid, I confess."

"Good for you, Ruby Beauchamp," grinned Saunders. "You're elected to the red circle. Might as well know who your friends are now. This is Jess Saunders; her chum is Muriel Vincent—Bubbles for short; this is Billy Runacres, British consul; Tod Carter there is my chief and only mate; I am Saunders, skipper of the *Black Pearl* schooner, at present looking for business and having nothing in sight."

"Er—Saunders? By any chance Kenneth Saunders who got his rowing, boxing, and football Blues at Oxford fifteen years ago or so?"

"That's a bit of past history which I

don't insist upon my friends knowing," smiled Red.

"Jove! Might I ask what in creation induced you to hop into a ring to meet an ostensible bruiser for a piffing championship fight? Not money, surely?"

"No," laughed Saunders, heartily. "I insisted on getting the cash simply because I believe in paying my own engagements and insist on receiving payment when due to me. I managed to stumble on that fight to-night in looking for something to take some of my megrims away, and discovered that one of the principals in the big battle was my one-voyage mate whom I had an hour or so earlier walloped into hospital. Taking his place seemed like manna in the wilderness to me. I crawled through the ropes filled with a volcanic temper which demanded something in the way of a real scrap to calm it. I told you I felt murderous, didn't I? But you? Money?"

Ruby Beauchamp laughed as heartily as Saunders had done.

"Not at all. A day or so ago I contracted to do it for filthy lucre, simply because I was broke to the wide, wide world. But to-night I felt so blooming happy and buoyant that, while I had no longer any need to do it, I had to carry on or burst with joy, old chap. And, if I may say so, I believe I gave you a tussle, didn't I?"

"It was a bit hot on both sides," Billy Runacres put in with a chuckle. "D'ye know, the girls saw the bills of that fight, with Dan Mallet's name on 'em, and made me take 'em, hoping to see Mallet pummeled properly. Jess left a note for you, Saunders, telling you where we had gone. I knew you'd follow. But we hardly expected to find you one of the chief actors." Runacres flashed a whimsical glance at Beauchamp, then at Bubbles. "Funny thing, though, the girls were not at all disappointed when they saw who was

in the ring. They both expressed a hope that Red would win."

"Of course we did!" cried Jess, warmly. Bubbles glared at Billy Runacres, and blushed.

#### CHAPTER IV.

"THE main point is," remarked Runacres, "that you will have to keep your eye on Dutch Zim, Saunders." The girls had retired after supper, leaving the men deep in a business discussion. "For all his greasy villainy, he pulls a strong rope with some of the big men here, and, as I told you might be the case, it is Zim who is responsible for the lack of business you've found here. The executive in Palembang is all right, straight as a string, but he's surrounded by fawning aids who are not apt to be so straight as he is."

"I don't remember ever clashing with him," remarked Red thoughtfully. "But if he's playing that game I can play it as well. I can whip a dozen like Dutch Zim at any game, straight or crooked. I'll have a talk with him in the morning."

"Better sleep on it anyhow," advised Runacres. "One thing you will not do, cannot do, and that is play any sort of shady game even to beat a rascal like Zim. Another thing is, you can't buck against a government with a European nation behind it. I hate to say it, Red, but I think your best plan would be to try other ports for a while. There's good demand for bottoms across the straits, I hear."

"That I will not do," retorted Saunders emphatically. "I'd be ashamed to shave if I let myself be run off any trading ground like that."

"What has shaving to do with it?" drawled Beauchamp.

"I'd have to look myself in the face, wouldn't I?"

Ruby Beauchamp chuckled with relish.

"I say, old chap," he said; "I think there's no need for you to grow whiskers yet. Suppose you let me edge in a word. I told you in the ring to-night that I had heard some good news. I have. I heard it a few days ago. I got some funds which had been hanging fire for years, and I bought a big tract of oil and rubber land up near the hills at the headwaters of the Kampar. I'm going up there to begin piling up the shekels, Saunders, and I can fill your schooner with material and supplies if you want to take the charter."

"H'm!" grunted Saunders. "It's a sporting offer, Beauchamp, but it's a short haul. I could only freight your goods into the Kampar estuary, not more than halfway to Pulu Lawan, and the rate would knock holes in your profits for years to come. You'd have to hire boats as far as the village, and carriers after that. Afraid I can't gouge you for what the job would be worth to me, old fellow, thanks."

"Rot! I have to pay anyhow, don't I, you ruddy idiot? Besides, I'd like to have you join me. We ought to pull together pretty well, and a pair of red-heads like you and me should burn up any and all obstacles, what?"

"That sounds good, Saunders," hinted Runacres, who had been keenly regarding Beauchamp's animated face which lost nothing of strength by the addition of the monocle. Tod Carter sat in silent anxiety, hoping that the skipper would accept, for the mere mention of oil and rubber spelled wealth untold to his simple seaman's mind.

"Furthermore," added Beauchamp, "you can carry the right kind of boats straight from here. I can engage all the men you can spare of your crew, and Carter here as well. Runacres will look after your interests, whether here or up in the Kampar, I think; and no doubt he'll be glad to keep an eye on the ladies."

Saunders suddenly sat upright and grinned pleasantly.

"Do you imagine you can leave the girls behind?" he asked.

"Why, you surely don't mean to say they would chance such a journey?" Beauchamp was frankly astonished.

"Some day ask Jess to tell you about her adventures in Zanzibar," the skipper chuckled. "Bubbles is built from the same pattern. They're woolen goods, a full yard wide. You may count them in the party, Ruby."

"You'll join me?"

"I'll freight you to the river, anyhow. We'll get to a more definite conclusion after you've outlined exactly what you propose to do with your purchase. Meet me here for lunch tomorrow. You too, Runacres, of course. Carter, you can go on board and take charge right away. If you find any of Mallet's things left behind, send 'em up to the hospital in the morning."

Beauchamp arrived an hour before luncheon in the morning, and his good-looking face was clouded with annoyance.

"What's wrong?" inquired Saunders. "Anything gone wrong with your proposition?"

"It seems doubtful now that there will be any proposition," replied Ruby seriously. "I've just been advised that the title I bought to those lands is valueless. I wanted to see Runacres about it."

"Who told you?" demanded Saunders sharply.

"Kempees & Van Zoom, the lawyers."

"Crooks!" was the bulletlike answer. "I know them. They were at the ringside last night, looking sick until the ring collapsed."

"Come to think," remarked Ruby, "I met Dutch Zim just outside the Kempees office."

"Shouldn't wonder if you did. But," Red lowered his voice, and, treading like a cat, reached the closed door,

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"*cherchez la*"—he flung open the door, an elderly Malay chambermaid tumbled in—"femme!" he concluded with a chuckle.

"By Jove!"

"Yes. By Jane, too. If we put two and two together and it only makes three, we're missing a count somewhere, old top. We assume Zim has put a spoke into your wheel; we know he isn't any friend of mine or my people; but about the only reason why he should try tricks on you at this time is because there is a chance of my working with you in your interests. And the only way he could discover that so quickly is by Tod Carter talking—which is absurd, as old friend Euclid says—or through some such agent as this." He seized the trembling woman by a skinny arm and swung her into a chair.

"How much is Dutch Zim paying you for sneaking around my door, hey?"

The woman swept him with a sharp glance of her beady black eyes, and showed an irregular row of yellow teeth.

"Nothing," she snapped. "I not sneakin'."

"Tell me the truth, or I'll punish you."

"I not tellin', and you not punishin'. You let me go."

Saunders released her, but stood close by.

"Beauchamp, run down to the wharf and hail Carter," he said quietly. "Bring him here with a couple of men, in a hurry."

The woman's eyes wavered for a moment, then dropped, and her leathery face grew inscrutable. Saunders locked the door after Beauchamp, and without haste, as coolly as if he were baling up a bundle of freight, he whipped off a pillow cover and flung it over the woman's head and shoulders; then, tearing down a wide split-bamboo water-dash on the wall, he rolled her

up in it *à la* Cleopatra going to Antony, and fastened the bundle with Jess' trunk straps.

In little more than half an hour Beauchamp brought Tod Carter back with him, and reported two able Gilbert Islanders at the service door below.

"Get 'em up, and cart this bundle aboard the schooner," Saunders ordered. "Handle it so that it doesn't squeak, and when you've unwrapped it lock it in the trade room and feed it until I come down. And start putting the *Pearl* in sea trim," he added as the mate went out followed by the grinning seamen with their burden.

Red and Ruby ate lunch together, impatient for the return of Runacres. When he arrived he brought Jess and Bubbles with him, and his expression was one of mixed satisfaction and disgust.

"That fellow Zim has stirred up a wasp's nest, somehow," he said. "You'd better snatch up Beauchamp's suggestion and pull out as soon as you can."

"I want to talk to you about that," Beauchamp said, with an awkward laugh. "I understand my title to the lands is no good. Kempees & Van Zoom told me so."

The girls looked hungrily at the empty dishes on the table. Lunch was brought up for them, and Billy Runacres sat down to join them.

"Have you got those title deeds here?" he asked, tackling a hot dish of curry. Beauchamp handed them to him, and he propped the papers against a fruit dish and perused them as he ate. Twice he went through them without comment, then folded them and put them into his inside pocket.

"I'll have these searched properly," he said. "If you're not tired of hearing my suggestions, I make one now that you carry on as you proposed last night—all of you." He glanced at Saunders doubtfully before he asked: "By the way, Red, can't you recall any

clash with Dutch Zim? Nothing in Zanzibar?"

Jess looked up quickly and she and Red exchanged glances. Both shook their heads however, until Runacres prompted:

"Wasn't there some sort of mix-up between you and the sultan, or his officers, about the time of the last bombardment?"

"There surely was!" exclaimed Jess. "Could I forget it?"

Saunders laughed.

"We had a little fuss, yes, Billy; but I don't recall any white man whose toes I trod on."

"Call it a little fuss if you like, you old pirate," grinned Runacres. "It sounded more like a war, the way I heard it. But try hard. Wasn't there a matter of a kidnaped harem, and a treasure dhow sunk, and another, full of the sultan's choicest rascals driven away into Portugese waters? Think."

"All of 'em. But the white man——"

"Dutch Zim was in command of the dhow that you chased away just when he had his hands on the treasure ship!"

"The devil! But it isn't likely, Billy. When I met the blackguard at the ticket window last night he seemed surprised when he discovered who I was."

"He never met you in Zanzibar, in person. And I don't believe you saw him. But he heard about you all right, and hasn't forgotten the haul you plucked out of his fingers. Anyhow, he's after you, with a pull big enough to upset anything I can do unless I make an international affair of it. Can't see my way to doing that, old fellow."

"Of course you can't. Wouldn't expect it in any case. I'm able to play off my own bat, if it comes to that." He figured on the chair-arm with a stub of pencil, and presently remarked: "About three hundred miles up to Singapore; less than sixty back to the Kampar estuary. Say three days at

most wasted. Ruby, where is your stuff?"

"Some of it's in a godown on the river just below the steamer wharf; the rest, barrin' my personal luggage, is floating in the half-dozen shallow boats I've bought for the Kampar river. They're moored off the dock, with a watchman for each. Why?"

Saunders ignored the question for the moment.

"Billy," he said, turning to the consul, "in case I'm delayed, can you get my clearance for Singapore to-day?"

"Certainly. Going to try fresh fields?" Runacres answered eagerly. Beauchamp looked glum.

"I'm going to freight Beauchamp and his gear right up to his property, if you report his title clear. So if you find that's O. K., you can clear me for Singapore, laden with general cargo, for orders. I'll send you the manifest and the crew list. You, Ruby, can go aboard the schooner with your baggage, and tell Carter to drop down and pick up the rest of your stuff. I'm as sure that your title is good as I am of my own ownership of the schooner. Tell Carter we sail to-night on the first of the ebbs."

Then, turning to the girls, he smiled quizzically:

"Better think it over, girls. You can stay here with Runacres, or stop over in Singapore, or come right along. But I can only promise you hardship and rough going if you choose to come with us."

The girls exchanged glances.

"Unless you're growing foolish, you know my answer," said Jess, with a toss of the head and a flirt of her sunny curls.

"I saw a fight for the first time last night," said Bubbles. "If I travel with the two ruffians whom I saw fighting I may see some more bully good sport. I'm going!"

"Then pack up and be ready when I

come for you in two hours," he told them, and left on private business of his own.

## CHAPTER V.

FIRST dispatching a cablegram to an agent in Singapore, advising him in code of the schooner's sailing and probable time of arrival, Saunders hurried through the less frequented stores and purchased additional equipment for his party.

He had rummaged small stores for his goods in preference to the greater shops, wishing to keep as little to the fore as possible; but once his work was done, he emerged into the broader thoroughfares and showed himself openly in the guise of an idler. Two objects were in his mind then. He wanted, if possible, to find a guide for the upper Kampar country; and if in addition he could square accounts with Dutch Zim before he sailed his contentment would be almost complete.

With both objects in view he walked past the blaring office of Kempees & Van Zoom, solicitors who derived the bulk of their income from a species of land-grabbing chicanery. For a fee, suitably fat, they would prove the Devil's title to Hades a worthless piece of asbestos paper. And since Beauchamp's announcement of their opinion regarding his title, Red had felt a growing certainty that Dutch Zim could be found hovering about their hive waiting for the sticky honey he hoped they would squeeze out to him.

On his first turn past the door Saunders collided with Billy Runacres, and the consul's face was dark with anger.

"Oh, here you are!" he cried. "Come along down the street a bit, Red. Say, can you pull out sooner than ebb tide?"

"As soon as Beauchamp's gear's shipped," replied Saunders. "But we'll have to tow out then, of course. Why?"

"Well, I've been searching that title.

I'm certain it's as clear as daylight, Red, but those sharks I've just left seem to have something up their sleeve."

"Have you cleared the schooner?"

"Yes. Did that first thing. Dutch Zim was down at the customhouse, I noticed."

"All right, Billy. We'll pull out the minute we're ready. If I don't see you again for a while, so long, and thanks."

They gripped hands warmly, and parted. Saunders turned and walked past the lawyers' office again, smiling softly and whistling through his teeth. He carried a stout, pliable wanghee cane, and as he stepped leisurely across the pavement he made the stick sing through the air in time with his rollicking tune.

Then he remembered he needed a guide, and swung about to follow Run-aces and ask his advice. So doing he came face to face with Dutch Zim, hurrying up from the direction of the customhouse and just entering the office. As once before, he imagined that smile, and that merry tune, to mean that Red Saunders was in an innocuous mood. And following the line of thought, since his own mood was one of jubilation, he accosted the sailor with insolence and bluster.

"Himmel! But you look like a crow with them black eyes, Red. I know a good doctor on Malay Street. I'll give you his address, then you can get your lamps cleaned in Singapore." His clumsy jocularly possessed no vitality, however, and he reverted to his more natural style of address. Saunders stood before him, smiling, unruffled, idly whipping his leg with his wanghee. "You're goin' to Singapore, ain't yuh? Nothin' doin' in rubber or oil, hey? I told yuh and that pink-headed snoozer Beauchamp that yuh couldn't gouge no wad o' money outa Dutch Zimmerman without a comeback, didn't I?"

With a sneering guffaw the fellow

set his foot on the step of the office, feeling quite safe even if that smiling face before him should change. Saunders appeared unconscious of the taunt. He gazed absently up and down the street for a moment; then, like a snake it struck, his cane thrust hard and straight into Zim's generous paunch, bringing him halfway to his knees with a grunt, too short of wind to shout.

Still without haste, Saunders seized him in one powerful hand while he still bent over in breathless distress, and with a grip like an oaken clamp held him there while the wanghee whistled in the air. Down it whizzed, and met the tight portion of Zim's nether attire with a crack like a gunshot. The victim roared lustily, and Saunders quickened his stroke in fear that he might be interrupted before he had finished the lesson.

From near by sounded a cracked, hoarse voice raised in unmusical song.

"If yer outside yuh can't be inside,  
If yer inside yuh can't be out——"

The song stopped abruptly as the singer rounded the corner and took in the scene. Then, drowning the roars of Dutch Zim as the rattle of a train will drown the murmur of a distant brook, the song rose redoubled in noise: "If yer outside yuh can't be in by a damn sight, haw, haw, haw!"

Saunders leaned over his squirming victim and spoke in a quiet, penetrating tone.

"Thanks for the offer of the doctor's address, Zim. Yes, I'm going to Singapore. There's something doing still in oil and rubber, and"—with a parting, tremendous whack—"there's no comeback for a has-been!"

Saunders released him and glanced at the noisy songster. A grin broke over his face at sight of him; a grin of genuine amusement. The fellow leaned against the house wall, laughing down at the groveling Zim, who was picking himself up. In color he had certainly

once been white, but now he was a rich chocolate hue. His hair had been bleached by sun and sea to the neutral shade of dead straw. For dress, he wore his birthday suit, scantily fortified by a nondescript square of rag about his loins. As a human specimen, his shape was that of a distance runner rather than of a wrestler—lean, lithe, lathy; and there was a merry, impudent light in his black eyes which made one forget the beautiful ugliness of his face. Barelegged, barefooted, bare-armed, he revealed a score of old scars of different kinds on shins, forearms, and feet. Behind him, taking no apparent interest in the strange doings of the white men, two smaller men stood patiently waiting for him. They were natives, dressed as he was, little differing in color, but of Malay or Hindoo-Malay blood unmistakably. And in the road of the side street down which they had just appeared, a covered bullock cart stood, a foolish-faced driver staring open-mouthed at the group on the pavement.

"Finished with him, gov'nor?" laughed the nondescript.

Saunders nodded.

"Then I'll take him. I been looking for him all the way from Achin Head."

Dutch Zim started up at the words and tone, peering into the man's laughing face. His mouth opened as if to yell for help, and the naked man uttered a series of grunts rapidly. Like two brown ghosts the natives slithered forward and fell upon Dutch Zim; his roar was choked off, and in less time than is required to tell it they had him trussed. The brown-white man leaped to the seat of the bullock cart, and stopped the driver's frightened howl with threat of a knife mysteriously produced out of his waist cloth.

"If yer inside yuh can't be out by a damn sight, haw, haw hawl!"

The man roared, drowning effectually whatever noise was made in loading

Zim into the cart. Saunders felt a growing curiosity concerning the queer stranger who knew so well how to go straight to a desired point. He stepped up to the cart.

"Where are you taking him?" he asked, smiling.

"Going to give him a little ride," the man grinned back cheerfully. "Not so long as he gave me, perhaps, but as far as this ancient bit o' buffalo beef will haul him."

"Wait a minute. You say you've come down from Achin?"

"Every blessed yard, gov'nor, on the hoof, too."

"Do you happen to know the Kampar country? I'm looking for a guide."

"Between us there's mighty few square miles of Sumatra we don't know. What d'ye want a guide for?"

"Breaking new ground. I'm in a hurry, too. Sail this evening, at latest. Let your natives carry on with the Dutchman, and come along. The wages will be right."

"Me leave my pals? Not much! Say, they are the only pair of real Batak cannibals ever civilized enough to follow a white man out of Achin. They tried to eat me at that, before I civilized 'em by force of toughness and sheer dog-gone cussedness. And we won't leave Zim, either, now we've found him already tamed for us after padding the hoof a matter of six or seven hundred miles to get him."

Saunders rarely made two guesses about a man. If he liked him at first sight he wanted him, and he had never known his judgment to fail. Now there was no man in Sumatra whom he would have considered for guide until this queer hybrid of a man had defiantly refused the job.

"Bring your pals along too," he suggested. "And——"

At that moment Kempees came out of his office and passed along the street.

He flung a sneering laugh at Saunders as he went by; and he carried with him a smug feeling that the frank smile with which the skipper answered his laugh would soon be changed to a scowl of defeat. Perhaps Dutch Zim would have put him right, had he been able to overcome the muting effect of a filthy loin-cloth stuffed into his mouth.

"And what?" reminded the hybrid specimen.

"I'm going across to Singapore first," said Saunders, "and unless you intend to murder Zim you can take him along too."

"Don't know about murder, guv'nor, but we surely don't propose giving him a banquet and a speech of welcome. 'Twasn't for that we raised blisters of blood on our feetses."

"Well, there's no time to discuss it now. As long as you don't carve him up and let your men eat him while he's in my schooner, I won't interfere. I don't love him, myself. Will you come?"

"As far as Singapore, anyway. Before we get there we'll find some sweet way of paying the bandicoot back. You won't be so squeamish when I tell you the score against him."

"Then cart him down to the river. Better bundle him up like freight. He pulls a heavy rope here. My schooner's the *Black Pearl*, and I'm Saunders, master and owner."

"Call me Tomking—yes one word—Tomking. It's the nearest to my name these cannibals could get. The man-eaters are Bang and Kohl. That's the nearest I got to theirs. We'll be there as soon as you, cap'n. Giddap, there!"

The ox cart dawdled down the road, creaking and lurching and raising the dust, and Saunders stood for a few minutes thinking over the things he had set out to get, and making sure that he had forgotten nothing. He satisfied himself that nothing remained to prevent him sailing at once, if the others

were all as ready, then he too strode away toward the river.

And as he hurried away a sleek, slant-eyed Celestial slipped out of an adjacent doorway and into the law office of Kempees & Van Zoom. In two minutes the Chinaman emerged, with expressionless face, and took up a position beside the door with his eyes wandering ever up and down the street as if waiting with a patience due to nothing else than inherent habit for somebody's return.

When he reached the *Black Pearl*, Saunders found his decks clear and clean, his hatches fastened down, and his able, smiling crew of islanders ready to jump at the orders of their returned and affectionately regarded Tod Carter. At the fore-castle hatch squatted the two Battaks, with Tomking standing by them looking as if he wanted to give the orders to carry the ship to sea. His air was that of a seaman, unmistakably, in spite of his clothing, or rather lack of it.

The girls were below, putting their cabins to rights, and Beauchamp was not in evidence. Saunders asked Carter if he had come on board.

"Everybody's here, cap'n, and three new hands as look like a suit o' clothes might not be wasted on 'em," grinned Tod. "Mr. Beauchamp's in the fore-hold stowing dynamite. The boats are still overside, swinging to their painters. I guessed the decks would better be clear, working out of the river, and they'll be handy if we want a boat in a hurry to carry out a line ashore in case we stick bucking the flood tide. All the gear that was in the boats is stowed below."

"Where's the bundle the three cupids brought on board?"

"They hove it down on top of the cargo, just for'ard of the trade-room hatch," grinned Carter. "Hope there wasn't anything breakable in it."

The skipper stepped to the side and



scanned the swirl of the stream. The flood tide ran strongly still, but there was a brisk wind from the south blowing fair down the river, and if he meant to pick up his anchor before the slack water he might as well start right away.

"All right, Tod," he said, "man the windlass."

Twilight was deepening into dark when the tide turned and permitted the three towing-rowboats to drop back. Then, with slack water and a fair wind together, the schooner slipped fast through the muddy water, past low-lying cotton fields and black patches of jungle. And the open sea was close ahead, Saunders had ordered the evening meal to be set in half an hour, when out of the darkness astern pealed a peremptory command to bring to.

Sparks leaped up from the funnel of a fast launch, and in the light of the fire, as the stoker flung on more fuel, the figures of armed men could readily be seen.

"*Black Pearl*, ahoy!" came the hail again. "Bring to, or we'll fire into you."

"Who are you?" roared Saunders, loosening his heavy automatic in the holster. "Speak up, quick!"

"Police boat!" came the reply like a shot.

## CHAPTER VI.

THE only way for a sailing vessel to bring up in a fast-running river before a fair wind is to get sail off and anchor, unless she can shoot alongside a deep-water bank. Saunders edged wide to the right bank, put his helm hard over and let go the headsails, bringing the schooner around in a broad arc. The anchor was let go in midstream, and the wildcat shot sparks as the iron cable ripped out. By the time the pursuing launch was abreast, the schooner was at rest, head to wind and tide, headsails hanging loose, and fore and mainsails flapping idly.

"What do you want?" the skipper demanded sharply.

"Put a ladder over. We'll board you," was the curt reply.

Beauchamp hung over the low rail, curiously peering down in an effort to distinguish personalities. His conscience was entirely clear, he knew, and this nocturnal adventure, on the very eve of their journey to his new possessions, only aroused his latent love of dramatic thrills. Jess and Bubbles, beside him, chattered merrily in whispers, detecting absurdities in the shadowy figures of the launch's people and finding fun therein.

"What do you want?" repeated the skipper, one hand on the ladder ropes. "You don't board me in the dark without giving me proof that you have legitimate business with me. Speak up sharp."

"Here's a warrant of search, captain," replied a nimble police officer, clambering up the side and showing a paper duly drawn up and bearing the official seal. The man looked genuine, and Saunders stood aside to let him come on board. But he resumed his place as the rest climbed up, and suddenly he put out his great hand and pushed a climber back into the launch with a thump.

"You stay down there with the ballast, Van Zoom. If you come up here I'll tell my boy to spank you. Now what do you want?" he asked the policeman.

Piet Zimmerman, called Dutch Zim," replied the officer.

"All right, officer, go ahead," Saunders said shortly. He was too busy wondering how far this delay might go to waste more time on the police intruders. He walked forward, looking for the two Battaks and Tomking, to advise them to make themselves inconspicuous; but they did not appear. Carter could not say where they were: the Gilbert Island crew only grinned

negatively. Policemen were at the fore-castle ladder, two more had entered the cabins, and a man was loosening the wedges of the hatch-battens. The officer stood at the rail, talking down to Van Zoom.

"I can't exceed the terms of the warrant, mynheer," said the officer, in no pleasant tones. "Warrant to search is all I have."

"But I want this schooner held up! Let your launch take me back to the town while you make the search drag out. I'll bring you a fresh warrant in a couple of hours."

"How far does your warrant go now?" put in Saunders quietly, stepping beside the officer.

"Search your vessel for the person of Zimmerman, and to take him off."

"Is that exactly all?"

"Yes. It's a hasty warrant, anyhow. I don't like working on incomplete orders like this. That's why I suggested that you might help me."

"I can't help you. I have seen no Dutch Zim on my ship. I am in a hurry now. You carry on with your search, my friend, and don't mind me. I'm going to get my anchor and pull out."

A yell of anger shrilled up from the lawyer in the launch. Carter, taking his cue from the skipper, took his men to the windlass again, and the little vessel crept up to her anchor to the tug of her chain.

Saunders, looking over the quarters on either side, to see all clear, noticed that of the small fleet of flat boats he had been towing astern, two were missing, and a quick search in the darkness failed to discover any cut or broken ropes at the rail. Beauchamp joined him, anxious to know if he might help anywhere. Saunders told him of the missing boats, for they were his.

"I doubt if you'll recover them now, Ruby. We may see them as we float down stream."

"I don't care if they're gone, Red," replied Beauchamp in lowered tones. He peered into the shadowy glow of the lanterns forward to make sure no sharp police ears were too near. "I saw one of 'em go," he whispered. "Our three guides took it. Thought you might prefer 'em out of the way, y'know, as this was a police visit, so I said nothing. But—" Beauchamp suddenly broke off, and his face assumed an expression of ludicrous alarm.

"I say, old chap," he gasped, "what about the old lady you sent on board to-day?"

Saunders whirled the wheel as the anchor left the ground and the jibs fluttered up the stays, and the schooner swung round, headed for the sea again. The launch alongside half filled with water as the schooner leaned over her in turning and canted her gunwale until the river poured in. The fires were extinguished, and the howls of Van Zoom and the stoker and boat-keeper brought up the policemen in alarm.

"Carry on your search," snapped Saunders to the officer who approached him to protest. "Better tow that launch astern, unless you want it filled. We'll be into the ocean swell in fifteen minutes, too, and your fires are out." Beauchamp's reminder of the old Malay hotel maid came as a shock. If she were discovered on board, and permitted to tell her tale, it would require no warrant to have the schooner arrested and her skipper haled back to town for kidnaping or abduction, whichever the age of the injured party warranted. When he saw his suggestions taking effect in the shape of an excited consultation at the rail, he grinned aside at Beauchamp and chuckled:

"I'd clean forgotten the old lady, Ruby. If these cops don't stop to find her, I'll marry her to Dutch Zim—if they don't ferret him out either—and

we'll land 'em on Singkep or Linga for a honeymoon. That ought to please Tomking, if he ever hears of it."

The schooner was speeding fast, and her forefoot had dipped into the first swells of the sea, before the policemen arrived at a decision.

"Can you steer close in to the bank, captain?" asked the officer. "Without fires our launch is powerless and we cannot risk being towed to sea. If you will drop us close to shore, we can row in and clean our fires."

"Hop in then," smiled Saunders, giving the schooner a sheer with the helm. "Sorry you can't stop to finish your rummage, old chap. What'll you tell your employer?"

"I'll tell him to go to the devil!" snapped the officer and Van Zoom, his mouth full of orders, complaints, and threats, subsided into silence before the policeman's wrath.

The launch was cast adrift under a steep bank overhung with lowering trees, and the *Black Pearl* drew rapidly away. The boats towing astern were to be taken on board before the sea was actually entered upon, and the schooner was swung across the current to check her way while they were hauled in.

"Listen!" cried Carter, suddenly, his hand raised. There came voices from the black shadow into which the launch had gone.

"It's the policemen ragging Van Zoom," guessed Beauchamp.

"There are other voices," said Saunders. He listened intently for some seconds, and in a momentary lull of the noises of ship and jungle he exclaimed:

"It's Dutch Zim's voice, for a thousand! And by Godfrey! there's a woman's voice, too, chattering like a fishwife in Low Malay!"

"Then that accounts for the other boat. And we sail with a clean slate, don't we, skipper?"

"I think perhaps we'd better stay away from Palembang for a while,"

chuckled Red, and relinquished the wheel to a seaman while he conned the schooner through the channel of the river mouth. The open sea lay black and bare to the north, the white foam began to curl gently at the sharp stem, and watches were set. Then, shrill and far-reaching from the shoreward gloom pealed in a roaring, raucous bellow:

"If yer inside yuh can't be outside,  
If yer outside, yuh can't be in—  
If yer outside yuh can't be inside by a damn  
sight, haw, haw, haw!"

Bringing the schooner to the wind, Saunders waited for the guide he had counted lost. And, cheerful as ever, unconcerned as if he had never left the schooner, Tomking led his cannibals on board, giving up the boat painter to a laughing seaman.

"Couldn't get hold of Dutch," he grinned. "Don't know how he got out, unless the old Malay girl let him loose; but I saw both of them drop over the side into a boat just before the police launch hailed you, so when you swung about we took another boat and slipped after them. But in the darkness we missed 'em and only smelled 'em out when they put out again to holler to the cops. Too late then. Let 'em go. I'll get Zim later on."

At midnight a consultation in the saloon came to an end, and the girls retired to rest. The schooner leaned easily to a warm southerly breeze, holding a course to pass just in sight of the lights of Muntok, on Banca Island, until Saunders had made a decision.

Carter, you may haul up to nor'-nor'-west as soon as you catch the glow of the lights," the skipper said, as the mate went on deck to begin his middle watch. When Carter had gone, and only Beauchamp and himself remained, Saunders answered the unspoken query in Ruby's face.

"We won't trouble Singapore this trip, old fellow. Our treatment of those police will assure the rats who

are trying to gouge you out of your rights of the unlikelihood of my venturing back to Sumatra for a while. There lies our big chance. Dutch Zim & Co. will take their time now. We'll make the straightest course possible for the Kampar River and beat 'em to it."

"But I say, Red, won't that bring you into more trouble with the authorities in the matter of your papers, or something? I don't want you to get into a mess over my affairs, y'know, particularly while the girls are on board."

Saunders laughed softly, and once for all time Harcourt Beauchamp cast out any slight remaining doubt concerning the resourcefulness and daring of the genial skipper.

"Beauchamp, you may leave the safety of the girls to me. Any trouble I may get into through my own actions in this matter will touch only myself. Without Jess and Bubbles on board, I would probably sail into the river, land the party, and send the schooner offshore under Tod Carter to wait until I signaled him to run in for us again. He's done that sort of thing before; one time he cruised just over the horizon off a river settlement for two months, and never asked a question.

"But because of the girls, we need him and every man of the crew. Therefore we shall take all hands, even the cook."

"How?" queried Ruby, curiously.

"All in good time, old chap," was the smiling defense. "Turn in now. We ought to be up to Mintok soon, then we shall get on a course which will leave us free of any chance of trouble from behind. Even if Zim's pull is strong enough to have us chased, we'll be looked for on the way to Singapore. That's where we won't be."

It was unlikely that Dutch Zim, or his backers or patrons, would care to enlist naval aid, even if they could command it; but with Dutch gunboats

and patrol vessels more or less often departing from Palembang upon their periodical rounds of the outlying islands, it was possible that one of those ships might be advised to keep an eye open for the *Black Pearl*; and with Red Saunders' reputation firmly established in Sumatra, any such wide divergence from his course, as called for in his clearance papers, as the schooner was making, would be sufficient to warrant question. But nothing of the kind happened, and the schooner, for two days continued on her course for the Kampar River.

A brief squall in mid-afternoon of the following day drove the schooner twenty-five miles on the way before the diminishing breeze which followed it sank to a calm again. During the first fury of the squall, faces which had become anxious during the calms and faint airs grew merry; the anxiety returned with the calm. Beauchamp was bewildered. He saw, dead ahead, the dark-blue loom of the lowland through which the river poured its greasy flood into the Malacca Straits. In his innocence he saw nothing but a reasonably quick, and wholly satisfactory passage to his destination. He was soon to understand much that he had been permitted to puzzle his brain over.

That night the clank of pumps shuddered through the vessel, and continued without a break until daylight. The first warning Beauchamp had that all was not well, came when the Fiji steward brought him his coffee at six o'clock.

"What's the noise, Bob?" he asked the Fijian.

"Plenty pump, sar." The reply was given in a matter-of-fact tone, as if a sinking ship and pumping drill were only incidents in a man's life. "Ship sinkin', I t'ink."

"What!" Beauchamp leaped from his bunk, dragged on his clothes anyhow, and, screwing in his monocle,

dashed out into the saloon calling Jess and Bubbles by name.

Bubbles opened the door and thrust out her head, her eyes bright and mischievous. Jess' voice was heard through the fanlight over the door, asking the trouble.

"By Jove! The bally ship's sinking! Dress yourselves and get on deck. Now you're glad it's calm, aren't you?"

"It would be much better if it were rough, or had been," was the laughing response. Beauchamp swore under his breath, repeated his admonition to hurry out, and dashed up the companionway.

## CHAPTER VII.

RED SAUNDERS stood on the after house, scanning the river mouth through binoculars; Tod Carter, at the midship rail, worked without haste and seemingly without concern, at a great square of canvas, fitting ropes to sides and corners. Between the masts a small gang of four seamen plied the pump-brakes with no more excitement than they had plied their brooms on other mornings.

Yet the water gushed in steady torrents from the pump lip and poured along the waterways to spout through the scuppers. Beauchamp stared in wonder for a moment, then ran forward and put the strength of his good right arm to the pump. The golden-brown seaman whom he pushed aside showed all his gleaming teeth in a wide, silent laugh.

"No bodder, sar," said the man. "Plenty time."

"Plenty time! By Jove, what sort of people are you?" He turned aft and yelled to Saunders:

"I say, Saunders, don't you know the girls are not out yet? Here's a fellow who says plenty of time!"

"Lots," Saunders grinned back. "Leave the pump, Ruby, and don't get excited." Leaping down from the

house, he stepped to a rod and wheel near the mainmast, and gave the wheel a dozen round turns. Then he satisfied Beauchamp's amazed curiosity.

"It's all right, old chap. I thought a light which we sighted during the night might be a prowling gunboat. It was a little coaster, and it's gone now. You see, to swing off Singapore, and make the river without falling foul of regulations, we have to run in here in distress.

"There's nothing more distressful than a sinking ship. But with the weather we've had it was too raw to pull a leak big enough to sink us, so I had to keep a sharp lookout against any possible intruders."

"Is that why the girls professed to be mad over the fine weather?"

"Nothing else. You see, the schooner's as tight as a bottle, Ruby; but I've had many occasions to use innocent little tricks in my business, and long ago I fitted the *Pearl* with a valve which could be opened or closed at will. I can sink her at any time, and raise her again providing I can choose my place. And now nothing less than sinking will do. But we'll sink her on the mud in the river, as far up as we can float, after we have taken everything out of her that water can spoil. Then, in six hours, when we want her, she can be pumped clear and floated again. We keep a full kit of diving gear snugly stowed away. Meanwhile there's no law in the maritime world which forbids a wrecked ship's company getting ashore to safety, no matter whether there's a port handy or whether it's on a wild bit of coast like this."

"By Jove!" Beauchamp grinned into Saunders' tranquil face and dropped his monocle. "What a rippin' piece of luck I took on that boxing bout. Just tell me what signs I may watch for in you when things are really hopeless, and I won't worry until I see 'em."

Saunders met his glance with a twinkling eye.

"Things are never hopeless, Ruby. There's hope in every situation right up to the pearly gates. Watch the girls, particularly Jess. When she's frightened it'll be excusable in you. And Bubbles is rapidly acquiring the same philosophy as we practice. Look at the crew, and old Tod Carter. They have it too."

"So it seems. \*And unless Tomking and his cannibals are keen actors, or fatalists, they're learning."

Beauchamp joined the girls aft, and submitted to a round of merry chaffing over his early morning alarm. After breakfast was over, the Fijian set to work packing up the cabin furnishings in water-tight cases, and Jess suggested that Beauchamp gather his baggage ready to go ashore. On deck, as the schooner swam slowly into the six-mile-wide mouth of the Kampar, the crew were busy striking out from the hold all the freight and stores of Beauchamp's outfit; two men with Carter rigged the tackles for hoisting out the boats. Amidships, gripped down to chocks with slip gripes, a long, light steel lifeboat sat, fitted with all the necessary gear. Beauchamp's own flat boats were light enough to be dropped over by hand.

The pumps were not going, the valve was closed; but sufficient water had been admitted into the bilges to bring the schooner's waterline down noticeably. That was in case of the sudden appearance of unwelcome craft. Saunders divided his attention between running his ship in, and watching the occasional, distant brown specks which marked native craft entering or leaving the Kampar. When the river and rearward sea lay clear of specks or smoke, the skipper leaped into alert life.

"Swing out the steel boat, Carter!" he ordered. "Take out the light towline, and put a double crew to work,

spell and spell at the oars. Tide's running up now. We can make time."

With the schooner sailing on, and the powerful boat towing ahead, with the tide rather more than counteracting the river current, before noon the head of navigation was in sight. On either side the land sloped easily inland, covered with dense wood and jungle; the river banks thrust their verdure sheer into the water; on both sides of a narrow channel wide mud flats lay yellow under the vertical sun. Saunders picked out a piece of bankside higher and less steamy than the rest, and abreast of this the anchor was let go.

With Tomking and his Battaks lending invaluable aid ashore in clearing a space for storage, the schooner was quickly emptied of everything movable or destructible in water. Then her sails were unbent and parceled in tarpaulin, and when all had been taken ashore Saunders himself slacked the cable, permitting the schooner to drop into deeper water, then opened the sea valve wide.

From the leafy screen behind which the crew were building stores in the native style, they watched the *Black Pearl's* mock funeral. Slowly she sank lower and lower; slowly she listed over to starboard, deeper and deeper, as if she must roll over. Then, so real that even Jess, who had seen the trick played before, gasped involuntarily, the schooner bubbled and sank into the muddy bed until only her masts and one side of her bulwarks were visible.

"But aren't you afraid that the natives about here will chop off your masts, or something?" Beauchamp asked, not yet entirely able to accept everything he saw without question.

"I won't be, when we leave," was the smiling reply.

The crew, still divided into their separate watches, but all working, completed the preparations for leaving while the party ate dinner. One watch

cut masses of tree branches, great ferns, and trusses of long, wiry grass. These were floated out and securely fastened to every visible part of the vessel until she resembled, at a hundred yards distance, a semidetached piece of foreshore that had slipped into the river. Back in the thick jungle the other party worked with Tomking and his Battaks to cover up all traces of the cache where lay the schooner's gear and spare stores. And when, near sundown, the boats shoved off to make a short journey upriver to eradicate the last trace of recent human arrival at the hidden depot, the keenest eye was unable to say with certainty which bit of tangled shore was the *Black Pearl*.

In this order the party started: In the lead went Tomking, Carter, and two of the crew in a flat boat, with emergency rations and water for two days. They traveled light, in order that their mobility and handiness might be preserved. They were the scouts. Next came the steel lifeboat, with Jess and Bubbles, Saunders, Beauchamp, and four oarsmen. In the steel boat was the bulk of the traveling stores. In the other three flat boats were the two Battaks, the remaining five seamen and the steward, and the rest of the stores and equipment. And each member of the party was armed according to his or her taste.

In the brief twilight of the equator the river rolled vague and mysterious; darkness fell like the dropping of a curtain; camp was made by torchlight and lantern. But in the short journey they had made since leaving the schooner, Ruby Beauchamp had experienced yet another thrill.

He had felt a little bit uneasy on the voyage from Palembang on the girls' account. He knew little of jungle life, and nothing whatever of the country he was going to, except that it was wild and all but untrod. When the schooner sank gurgling into the mud,

he gazed reflectively at the long-cloaked figures of Jess and Bubbles, and almost regretted their presence. For the first time he realized that such a journey, with its possibilities of trouble other than the obstacles of nature, was not exactly on the picnic order. But on stepping into the boat he had changed his mind slightly.

The girls had equipped themselves for the trip with all the cunning of old trailers. Beneath their long, rainproof cloaks, they wore tunics and short skirts of stout khaki cloth; leather puttees and stout boots, with a hint of sensible corduroy knickers, showed their full knowledge of the conditions ahead. And at the leather belt of each hung a holster, out of which peeped the butt of a pistol lacking all ornamentation: a real gun, in fact.

Now, while camp was being pitched, and the Fijian was busy opening his packages, Jess and Bubbles received the firewood and stones brought in by the men and set to work to build a camp fire of noble size and cunning arrangement. And when the fire was ready, it was the girls who cooked the supper; not as girls usually do in make-believe camp, burning the food, smoking the water, and roasting and smudging their pretty faces; but expertly, cleanly, and well, themselves joining in the circle as hungry as any, and as cool and unruffled.

A gray dawn start saw the boats fifty miles on the way by the following noon, and when the dinner halt was made on a sand flat in midstream the village of Pulu Lawan was in sight on the northern bank at the next bend. Here additional laborers were to be recruited, and Saunders took Tomking and Beauchamp forward to see what could be had.

When the boats arrived, an hour later, a gang of sturdy Malays awaited them on the shore. Saunders had secured thirty men, and with them were grouped a few women and some fat babies; while

behind the group, making a harrangue in excited tones, a portly Chinaman shook his fist at the white men in un-Celestial wrath. Something that the Chinaman shrieked caused a stir of uneasiness among the laborers; Saunders swiftly stopped the spread of it by producing a bag of cash and distributing wages in advance to the men.

On the bank lay a pile of native food-stuffs, made up into packs of individual man capacity. Calling one of the Battaks and three of his own men from the boats, the skipper marshaled the gang under their supervision, and he saw the gang march away upriver, laden with their packs, and guarded by his dependable Gilbert Islanders at the heels of the Achin cannibal. Then he re-embarked, and the boats proceeded. None of the party evinced any desire to improve their knowledge of Pulu Lawan; a mile away upriver the reek of the squalid settlement followed them.

The river was now shallow enough for poling, and the flat boats made faster progress; but every mile traversed increased the difficulty of navigating the steel lifeboat.

"Where does your land begin, Beauchamp?" Saunders asked, after thirty minutes had been lost hauling the steel boat out of the sucking mud.

"About fifty miles upriver from Pulu Lawan the river forks. The main stream runs down from the hills due east from Mount Ophir, and the tributary comes in from the foothills of Merapi. My land is all that section inclosed by the two streams, and bounded by the jungle fringe at the hills."

"Huh! A fine voyage for a sailor!" grunted Saunders. "It's forty miles farther to the nearest yard of your land, and the boat barely floats now."

"Better quit the river and march?" queried Beauchamp.

"Good Lud, man! It'll take days! Besides, if your domain is surrounded by water, we need boats unless we're to

develop web feet packing our stuff across. And I want the steel boat along, if it's at all possible. It's fitted up to my own ideas, Ruby; it's not only a boat, but at times it's served as a darned good fort, and it's packed with enough emergency stores to last all the people it will hold for a week."

"Then what's to be done? I confess I'm stumped."

"Dam the river."

"With all my heart," laughed Beauchamp. "Damn it or cuss it in any old way."

"Oh, not that kind of damn," grinned Saunders. "Dam it, with trees, stones, and mud, and stuff, then perhaps we can float up to your front garden, old chap."

After another hour of rowing, poling, and hauling from the banks, the steel boat reached an impassable stretch of steaming, festering mud flats through which the narrowest of ribbons of yellow current trickled. On either bank lay the dense, gloomy jungle, noisy with bird life, fetid with the fetor of rotting vegetation. Over the mass of almost blue-black foliage of the forest, the slender brown stalks and spreading green heads of sago and coconut palms rose in isolated groves near the river.

Down upon all poured the midsummer sun, vertically overhead at noon, never seeming to moderate its fierce heat from the moment of rising out of the cool east to its sinking beyond the western heat-haze. A bilious glare reflected from the yellow mud shimmered and wavered with the foul vapors of miasma.

"Sooner we get past here the better," stated Saunders tersely, after a scrutiny of the whole scene. "Here, Tomking, can you call that cannibal of yours? That jungle looks as if the marching party must be ten miles away at least."

For answer Tomking called the other Battak and together they vanished in the bush to speedily reappear climbing



the smooth stem of the tallest palm. When they emerged out of the top of the mass of branches they cupped their hands, and in chorus sent a shrill, bell-clear yell echoing away over the forest.

For two minutes they remained motionless, each with a hand behind his right ear; then they descended and reappeared at the river bank.

"I heard 'em," reported Tomking simply. "They'll get here in an hour. What d'you want done first?"

"Palms, trunk and head; rocks, mud, grass, bush, anything in the shape of vines or creepers, for rope. All hands will turn to. Carter, serve out the tools. Beauchamp, come with me and help the girls make camp. We won't get away from here this evening, however we work."

When the sun touched the western forest rim, fifty tall palms lay in a pile beside the river, their heavy heads lopped off. The camp nestled in the clearing made by cutting the trees and jungle grasses, just far enough from the river to be free of the muddy odors from it. The heat was terrific, the mosquitoes and other stinging insects legion. For all the white man's discomforts, before sundown there marched out of the jungle a cheerful army of laborers, each man carrying a pack and his tools, each woman carrying cooking utensils at least; a few carried, also, each a fat, laughing baby slung in a shawl at her hip. If they knew it, the fact that they followed a cannibal Achinese seemed to trouble them not a bit; the fattest of the fat babies gurgled and sucked a fat thumb when the Bat-tak brushed past to report to Tomking.

## CHAPTER VIII.

BEFORE the sun had climbed to the zenith on the following day, a strong barrier stretched across the river from bank to bank. It had been regularly built of long palm stems, interwoven

with tough grasses and bush, lashed and cross-lashed with vines and creeper stalks. Then the boats were emptied, the baggage and other material portaged beyond the flats, and the big steel boat hauled over the greazy ooze by men walking alongside on mudshoes fashioned from the wide, strong leaves of the double coconut. The flatboats floated by, when emptied, with one man in each; then the last boat, from the upstream side of the dam, towed the end of it across and fastened it to the farther shore. The afternoon was occupied in plastering the barrier with several tons of claylike mud and stones; then the boats, aground on the shore, were loaded, and it remained only to wait until the rising river should permit them to proceed.

"If it would only rain!" grumbled Saunders, irked at the forced inaction. "I'll bet as soon as we get up there, and want a spell of dry weather, it'll pour down on us in sheets."

Beauchamp and Carter tried the boats every fifteen minutes or so until darkness fell; but the slow-running river rose all but imperceptibly.

"It's another night in camp for us," remarked Carter, looking disgustedly upon the turbid expanse. "Them flying boats are what we want up here."

"Why don't you come in to supper?" cried Bubbles, coming upon them in the midst of their disgusted comments. "Don't you know that a watched pot never boils?"

"Thanks for the lesson," smiled Beauchamp with a bow. "This is rapid advancement in learning indeed."

They joined the circle about the lantern-lighted spread. At a little distance hummed and chattered the laborers' camp; the squalling of a baby, made fretful by the mosquitoes added a human note to the monkeylike hubbub.

"Any improvement?" asked Saunders.

"The bally river hasn't risen more than an inch," replied Ruby. Tomking

stood just outside the lighted circle, his own supper finished, with the air of a white man, long thrown among natives, who longs yet hesitates to rejoin his own kind. His attire perhaps intensified his shyness; for even the presence of the girls had not made him resume the uncomfortable gear of the white man. When Beauchamp uttered his discouraging report, Tomking stepped forward, his supremely ugly face lighted almost to good looks by the life in his expressive eyes.

"The river rises quicker in the early morning," he volunteered. "There's a nightly rain in the mountains. It never fails."

There had been an element of mystery about Tomking ever since the first day of their acquaintance; and his hint that he would some time tell of his experiences with Dutch Zim had not been forgotten by Saunders. In Pulu Lawan, too, Tomking had known exactly where and how to secure laborers, and had actually taken them away from their employer, the gross Chinaman who had harangued them unsuccessfully against the voice of the skipper's cash.

"Sit down and smoke a cheroot," the skipper said, edging aside to make room between himself and Beauchamp. The man hesitated still, until Jess smiled brightly up at him and added her invitation:

"Don't feel shy with us, Tomking. We don't bother about the fashions in camp, if it's your clothes you're worrying about."

"Then you think we can start again at daylight?" suggested Saunders.

"Soon after, anyway."

"And carry good water right up to the fork of the streams?"

"Yes, unless somebody back here busts up the dam on us."

"I don't anticipate that. Who would be likely to do it, and why?"

"Well you saw the fat chink in Pulu

Lawan. Didn't he try to stop you hiring labor? He knew me, too. He's one of the small fry of the crooks' firm of Van Zoom, Kempees, Dutch Zim & Co."

Tomking spoke with animation, puffing furiously at his strong cheroot. When he named Dutch Zim, his usually attractive eyes glared redly, and Saunders prompted him.

"But how is it that Dutch Zim is so strong about here? He's only a common beach comber, isn't he? D'you know much about him?"

"He's the dirty-work end of the shark firm, and Mister Beauchamp's got hold of a bit o' land which is worth a lot o' money. He got his title before the fat Chinaman at Pulu Lawan sent down word that there was oil and gold, besides rubber to be had for the getting. You'll see plenty o' sport, if your ideas of sport include running off, or being run off by, a lot o' bad Malays at the heels of a rotten bad white."

"That need not worry us, Tomking. I think we can match wits and strength against Dutch Zim. But what I want to know is how far down his backing goes. Is he just a crooked arm of a crooked body, or is the whole official outfit of Palembang in on a gigantic graft? I can't credit that."

Tomking laughed unpleasantly.

"It's truer than you'd think possible. Dutch Zim more than once got soldiers lent him to pull his burnt chestnuts out of the ashes. And the time I got left behind among the Battak cannibals, it was while I was working for him. There's gold up there in Achin, too. He never trusted himself along with that man-eating crew, not him; but he had enough pull to get a body of troops sent up to escort his loot out, and enough damned crookedness—pardon me, ladies—to make the soldiers leave me in the claws of the Battak priests. He couldn't do that unless the officer was willing, could he? And my notion of the Dutch army and navy officers is

that they're straight, and clean. It come from higher up, did that order."

"Haven't you any idea who it is?" Beauchamp put in.

"Sure I got an idea, and it'll hit pretty close when the target score's counted," returned Tomking fiercely. "It's a woman. If it ain't, you can ship me back to the cannibals again."

Tod Carter got up and strolled down to the river. He was never very much interested when the talk swung around to women. For that reason Saunders had ever found him a safe custodian of secrets, when their mutual business brought them in contact with the fairer, frailer sex. Saunders watched his grizzled mate depart with a quiet smile, which intensified in his eyes only when he met Jess' wise glance and saw the almost imperceptible little nod of her head.

"A woman, hey?" he echoed, not caring to risk curtailing Tomking's opinions by casting a palpable verbal bait.

"Yes, a woman. A woman that can look like a lady, talk like a siren, and act like a devil." Tomking glanced apprehensively toward the girls. Jess sat beside Saunders, quietly attentive, evincing no fear concerning what might transpire in his tale. Bubbles was curled up, kittenlike, with her shoulder resting, apparently unconsciously, against Beauchamp, her dark eyes glowing with interest. The skipper noticed the man's pause, and smiled at him.

"Go on," he said. "I'll tell you when to stop."

"She's got the nerve of Old Nick, the looks of a houri, the wealth of Sheba, and the conscience of a she-gorilla," Tomking went on. "That time the military expedition went into Achin to settle an uprising of the Battaks, and come out with the backs whipped off their clothes, she was waiting down in Medan for the officer in command to send her down her share of the dust they'd swiped from the native gold washers.

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He didn't send it. He brought it himself, and left his men in the middle of a hot lot of sharp-toothed sports while he panjandered with her in the town. I heard after that he demanded payment as she had promised him; she laughed in his face, reported him to his chief as having insulted her, and he blew out his brains—if ever he had any—while the chief took her off on a whirl over to Batavia."

Jess smiled up at the skipper, her expression hinting that she believed Tomking to be giving rein to a vivid imagination. Saunders winked at her, cautioning silence.

"Gracious!" cried Bubbles, unaware of that hint. "Why, my dear man, it sounds just like a tale out of 'Drops from a Bloody Kris,' or some such shocker."

"Can't help that, lady," grinned Tomking, nowise angry at being doubted. "Only time can prove whether that yarn is true or not. Main thing is, for us, that I know you're going up against something stronger than Dutch Zim. When all's done, you'll be quite ready to leave that small-time snake to me."

Tod Carter appeared in the circle again, and his face was dark with suspicion.

"Can't make it out, skipper," he said. "The blame river seems to be falling instead of rising."

The men got up quickly and stepped down to the bank. It required only a single glance at the boats to realize that unless they had been hauled farther up, the water had left them a full three inches. The moon still lingered below the eastern horizon, the long line of the dam stretched into invisibility at mid-stream. But, to attentive ears, there came the gurgle and murmur of running water out there in the blackness.

Tomking spoke three short words in the Battak tongue, and two soft splashes followed immediately at the river shore. Far over toward the other bank there

sounded a curious, elusive creaking and shrilling not to be identified with any of the jungle noises of the night. Then, with staggering sharpness, two human yells pealed out as one, to be cut short midway.

Saunders and Beauchamp peered into the black shadows, and the grim, joyless chuckle of Tomking tingled in their ears. Silently the two girls had joined them at the river, and Tomking's chuckle ceased as abruptly as had those penetrating yells. Then the dam creaked and swayed near by, and out of the gloom two figures leaped, advanced to Tomking, spoke one word each, and cast two objects at his feet which fell with dull, reboundless thuds.

The Battaks vanished again to their own camp; but Tomking, fear in his eyes for the first time, glared around at Saunders and the others, hurriedly picked up what the Battaks had cast down, and plunged into the jungle. Like a great cat Saunders went after him, and overtook him as he hurled one of the objects far into the thicket.

"What is it?" the skipper demanded, staying the other's arm as he raised it for another throw.

Tomking shrugged his bare shoulders, and held out his missile. The skipper touched it, and drew back with a curse of unpleasant surprise.

"A bloody head!" he swore, in disgust. "What does this mean?"

"It means," said Tomking, simply, "that Dutch Zim's fat Chinaman has started work. I sent the Battaks over to see where the water was getting through the dam. There had to be a narrow opening, to let the whole river through in such a close stream as to tear a channel in the mud. They brought me two heads for an answer. Now we have to mend the dam, and wait a bit longer."

"Call all hands," Saunders ordered. "Pitch that thing after the other, and don't let the women hear of this. We'll

get to work right away, and leave a couple of men behind to watch the ends of the dam this time.

"But mind," he admonished, "no more head-lobbing until I give the word. I'm not in the butchering business."

## CHAPTER IX

THE dam was repaired, and a watch set; the water began to rise rapidly just before dawn, and one by one the boats floated. Two days passed in arduous negotiation of flats and narrow channels; then the river forks came in sight—the beginning of Ruby Beauchamp's disputed domain.

The marching laborers were already waiting on the farther bank of the river under the command of Tomking and Tod Carter, who had taken charge in anticipation of further possible trouble. Carter had nothing to report, however; the march had been marked by nothing more than the difficulties of the virgin jungle.

"Here you are, Beauchamp," remarked Saunders, waving a hand over the pile of goods on the point of land between the forks. "Your gear is on the spot, all sound, dry, and Bristol-fashion. Where next?"

"Better make a base camp here," he said after a period of deep thought in which his gaze had flitted concernedly toward the girls. "This will need talking over, Saunders. By the look of things, we ought to have come in across the mountains from the westward. I don't see how we are going to get anything out of here by river, do you?"

"Cross bridges when you get to 'em," advised the skipper, shortly. "Didn't come all this way to quit cold, did you?"

Beauchamp flushed, and again his gaze wandered to the girls. Saunders noticed it now.

"I didn't mean to say that, Ruby," he said, quietly. "And I see your point. But let me put you right now, and it

goes for all time. Jess and her chum came with us knowing quite well that they were not starting on a picnic. They'll stick as tight as any of the men. Now let's get to work, not to talk."

Rubber trees grew thickly in the near forest, and scouts sent out returned with the report that they extended far beyond two hours' march. The jungle became less tangled as the land rose, and following the left branch of the river fork there was a stretch of several miles of bare, rocky-sprinkled levels. The last scout to come in, one of the Battaks whose vision had been proved to rival the eagle's, told of having climbed a palm on the crest of a rise and seen the crest of Ophir in the glare of the setting sun.

"That's impossible, of course," Saunders decided. "But if he only saw the loom of the main range of mountains, it shows that we're not so far from open country. We'll make an early start tomorrow, Ruby, leaving a base here, and try to reach some spot where we can find water, and from which we can send out prospecting parties into the thicker country."

"We ought first to get up to the western boundary of the tract," said Beauchamp, thoughtfully. "You see, the rivers are natural and sufficient boundaries on two sides, but the western line is simply the jungle fringe at the foothills. It curves in a wide arc, the ends are much farther west than the middle, and we might easily lose the best bit of the lot by having the two horns cut off, assuming that there is gold in any quantity at the head of these streams."

"How might that decapitation be done?" Jess wanted to know. Saunders looked his opinion, also smilingly unbelieving.

"Why, couldn't somebody cut back the jungle fringe as easily as we shall have to cut our way there?" answered Beauchamp.

"Bridges again," smiled the skipper.

"Bridges like chickens, old chap: cross or count neither prematurely. I understand your land goes to the junction of river and jungle, and that means as nature planted it, in my opinion. Anyway, that's the opinion we'll back against all comers, with your permission."

That night the boats were hauled out of the water and covered over with weather-resisting thatches of broad leaves. The big steel lifeboat was set up on wooden cradles near the point of the land, covered as were the rest, but with a tight wooden cover of board sections under the thatch. And rollers lay on planks beneath it, wide, and light, ready at five minutes' notice to carry the craft down to water's edge. In the boat was a full equipment of oars, sails, arms, and stores. At a pinch it could carry thirty men, and there were emergency rations for that number. When thatched, however, the lifeboat was left as invisible as the flat boats.

It was midnight before the half moon rose that night, but it peeped down on wakeful figures as well as the prone forms of the sleepers. The swift falling of the river was what made Tomking incapable of sleeping, for he knew what it meant. It told its story, as clearly as spoken words; a story of murdered barrier guards, and a thoroughly bursted dam. By moonrise the river beds lay revealed to one third the width of the streams, and the ribbons of water trickled noisily amid the boulders. Carter could not sleep for thinking of the unsailorly predicament his skipper had landed them in at last. Bred on the oceans, knowing little of the dry earth and caring less, Tod Carter would follow Red Saunders right up to the doors of perdition without comment; but his sailorly instincts gagged at the idea of that fine steel lifeboat, a veritable floating stronghold on which he and the skipper had lavished the thought of years, stuck under a thatch like a coolie hut and doomed to rust away there for

want of water to float her back to her proper element.

## CHAPTER X.

TWENTY miles of progress occupied the party a full week.

Then at the end of the week, when a Sunday rest was decided advisable, and camp was pitched in a grassy glade among forest growth so sparse that it indicated a near approach to the jungle fringe, Tomking appeared with his scouts and brought the first certain proofs of other greatly-hoped-for treasures.

A Battak produced from his loin cloth a calabash and gave it to Beauchamp. The other Achinese untied a corner of his garment and dribbled a spoonful of glittering particles into Red Saunders' hand. Beauchamp unstoppered the calabash, and his aristocratic nose wrinkled.

"Jove!" he gasped, holding the calabash at arm's length and frowning across it at Saunders, who stood laughing at him. "What have you tapped, Tomking—a tomb?"

"That's petroleum, you ass," grinned the skipper. "Turn it out into a dish. Let's see it."

The oleaginous mess was poured out, a half-pint of yellowish-brown, evilly smelling crude oil. Beside it was laid the little heap of gold dust, and for a moment no one spoke. Here at last was tangible evidence of wealth waiting to be taken from the earth far in excess of anything to be tapped from the rubber trees in the forest, if the samples were fair. And the bringing in of those small parcels of oil and gold dust gave a good test of the individual characters of the people in the party.

Beauchamp, to whom it all belonged, samples and whatever might follow, smiled happily at everybody around him, and dropped his monocle.

"I say, people, I'm awfully glad," he

said, earnestly. "You won't lose in profits at least by your sportin' action in helpin' me out."

"Don't start in giving away fortunes at first sight of color," Saunders laughed. "But I'm glad to see the stuff, too, Ruby. You have something worth fighting for, anyhow."

"Yes, gents, and believe me, you'll have to fight for it or I'm a bimlycrow," Tomking interjected savagely.

"Oh, perhaps you fancy that," smiled Jess, stirring the glittering dust with her pink forefinger idly. "Don't let's anticipate trouble." Tod Carter stood behind the skipper, and except for a fleeting glance of contempt flung at the pitiful little display made by the samples, evinced no interest in riches or the prospect of having to fight for them. Truth was, the grizzled old sea-dog had almost expected to find oil already barreled, gold tumbling out of the rocks in minted coin, and rubber growing in balls on the trees like coconuts or calabashes. At Jess' advice he nodded his shaggy head.

"That's right," he grumbled. "Let's wait till we get something worth scrappin' for before we get scared of somebody else buttin' in to rob us of it." Tomking grinned pityingly at him.

"Miss Jess, I don't fancy things," he said. "Leastways, not this sort o' thing. That oil came from a patch of saturated ground more than a mile square. It's just a swamp of grease worth big money per yard. The dust came out of a pocket in a little brook that runs into the river out of a hole in the rock, and by all the signs there's a bullock-load of it for the seeking.

"And it's never happened, at least in my time, that any bit o' ground one half as rich as this looks is let go out of the hands of the bunch o' pirates I've told you about. You'll see, Mister Beauchamp, that there was method behind Kempees & Van Zoom making out your title to be faulty."

Tomking spoke with more intensity.

and less of bush jargon, than at any time since he had joined the party; and his reminder had the effect of damping some of the enthusiasm which his discoveries had evoked. He went off with his Battaks while supper was being prepared, and did not reappear until after the camp had gone to sleep hours afterward.

Saunders was absent from breakfast on Sunday morning, and nobody seemed to know where he had gone. The watchman, one of the schooner's crew, had seen him about midnight, after the others had gone to their blankets, and he had sent him, the watchman, to take a look at the state of the river, with an order to do so every hour.

As the party were about to clear away the remnants of the morning meal, the skipper emerged from the jungle, and Jess glanced up at his face. A little shiver rippled through her, for he wore the smile that warned of trouble. He called Beauchamp and Carter aside, and in the recesses of a wild banana patch swung around on them.

"Tomking was right!" he said. "You'll have to fight for your own, Beauchamp. There's a bunch of men lopping bushes at this moment, right on your boundary; and the boss of the job is an officer, unless he's camouflaged."

"Then the only thing to do is to get there and stop 'em at once," Beauchamp retorted warmly. "By Jove, old fellow, we can't let the bounders——"

"That's all I wanted to know," Saunders interrupted him. "We start at once. I suppose you'll go the limit to protect your title, won't you?"

"Er—what is your idea of a limit?" he inquired, with a reminiscent grin. "I remember that you referred to our little defiance of the police in the river as merely a joke."

"It was a joke," retorted Saunders impatiently. "That was as much of a joke as making Dutch Zim disgorge the purse for the fight. This will be no

joke, unless you let 'em make it one on us. If you're serious about defending your rights, there must be no hesitation when it comes to a show-down. My way would be to sail in and run the pirates off the lot with lead before they get a footing. Your way may be different."

"That's the only way, mister," Tod Carter put in sharply.

Beauchamp laughed.

"That is surely the limit, Saunders. I'm willing to go as far as shooting to defend my property, of course; but it seems to me that your plan is attacking, not defending. Suppose we see what they're up to, and who they are, first, what?"

"I know who they are," returned the skipper. "You know it, too. If Dutch Zim isn't there himself, he isn't far away, I'll gamble on it. But it's your affair, Beauchamp. Go ahead on any line you like. We'll back you. And if you find that you're up against something too deep for your beautiful faith in human nature, just tip me the word and I'll take charge. Only, for the love of Jupiter, let's move."

The camp was broken up, and the entire party, with all their stores and material, took the trail westward. There was no need any longer to send out side parties; the objective lay ahead, and Saunders, leading with Tomking and two of his tried Gilbert Islanders, set a pace which permitted no loitering. The girls, accustomed as they were to roughing it, were taxed to keep with the leaders. Progress slowed as the ground rose higher, and when the edge of the jungle was reached, even Saunders, the iron man, welcomed the brief halt before emerging upon the open.

"We'll make our base right here on the stream," decided Beauchamp after a scrutiny of the foothills beyond. "This is the natural fringe of the jungle, isn't it?"

"You'd better run your boundary line across," Saunders replied.

"Best thing we can do, if you want me to suggest, is to mark your boundary here, and leave the camp in charge of Carter and a few men to look after things; then tell off six of my crew, who are all fitted with brains, to follow along the fringe and plant marks as they come. They can overtake us. We'll hike right out to the other end, establish your line, and run it back to meet our men. Then, on that part where the bush has been cleared, you'll station guards with rifles. Keep a sort of armed peace, if you like; but let nobody across that line until you've examined into their business."

"I don't see any other way," replied Beauchamp.

Leaving the new camp under a capable guard, Saunders and Beauchamp took two men and cut across the bare rocky rises of the hills. This route had the advantage of height, from which, before twilight set in, a considerable straggling party of men could be seen about the middle of the distance between rivers.

It was dark when the little band of legal occupiers reached the headwaters of the Kampar and prepared to checkmate the would-be usurpers. By the light of torches a cairn of stones was set up and others at hundred-yard intervals were placed along the fringe, until there was a station for each of the four men of the party.

"Let's eat now," suggested Saunders, flinging down his haversack. "And, Beauchamp, this is where you simply have to decide to go the limit. You'll have a single-handed watch at one of the cairns, I shall have another, and the two men likewise. There's no support for you, except a moral one. You'll discover that you're dealing with men who are very prone to shoot before challenging, and you'd better act accordingly. These fellows who are moving your lines are doing it knowing that they're on a crooked game, and your

life doesn't count. Sleep light, don't let go of your gun, and don't back a yard behind your lawful line."

It was clear daylight when Saunders was awakened by the crunch of feet and the chatter of voices. He started to his feet, ready for anything, but with a feeling of curiosity as to the identity of the leader of that land-grabbing expedition predominant in his mind. He looked around upon the faces of at least sixty men of every type and almost every race.

His eyes swept over the main body leisurely before he lowered them to look into the face of the actual leader.

"Good morning," he said, civilly. "Can I do anything for you?"

The leader, a man of medium size and of no particular distinction of features, was dressed in a military uniform, and armed with a pair of Luger automatic pistols and a short heavy knife similar to the Gurka kukri. He stared insolently up at the cool skipper, twisting a tiny point of his moustache with thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Saunders met his stare with a bland smile. The man frowned darkly.

"Do for me?" he echoed the skipper's words with a drawl. "You can take yourself out of my way. And if you piled those stones here you may remove them, quickly."

"See here, little man, said Saunders, in a coldly savage tone, "I don't know you from Jim Crow; but I do know that the owner of this land has put me here on guard, and I'll pick to pieces the robber who steps over the line."

One of the vacant-faced bush-cutters uttered a cackle in keeping with his expression, and more than one of the more intelligent faces wore a sly grin; for the officer stood fuming with rage before the big red-headed man who defied him, unable to force his tongue to speech. And swinging along, gun in hand, fifty yards away came Ruby Beauchamp, his head bare and his glorious



thatch of vivid hair glinting in the sun to outrival the gleaming curls of Saunders.

## CHAPTER XI.

"Good morning, sir, and what can I do for you," smiled Beauchamp, unconsciously repeating the exact salutation of Saunders.

The officer stared in ludicrous amazement at the newcomer, and his eyes flitted from one to the other of those redheads. He seemed to be suddenly shorn of his garb of insolent authority; then some of his own men grinned audibly, and the situation was in danger of lapsing into comedy. He straightened up abruptly and his face darkened.

"I have already told this fellow——"

"Say Saunders," commanded Red.

"Saunders then. I have told Saunders I require him to take down these stones and get off the ground. I am running a line for the government, and you are trespassing and I shall run you off!"

"Listen——" Saunders waited anxiously for Beauchamp's decision, hoping, yet almost fearing. "Listen," said Ruby, "I have title to this land. Your men are destroying my property by cutting down bushes which I prefer to have remain. When you can show me authority superior to that which awarded me my right to this tract of land, I shall withdraw. Until that time, since you choose to play that game, you will cross this line and enter my territory at your own risk."

With a snarling yell the self-styled officer dragged a pistol from the holster, leaped forward, and overturned Red's pile of stones with his foot, calling to his men to set upon the defiant redheads. A few of his followers made uncertain moves, but most of them hung back, grinning.

Ruby Beauchamp leveled his own weapon, coolly, leisurely as if shooting

at a target, and shot at the man's pistol-hand. The gun dropped with a clank on the stones, and as the men swarmed around, and the humiliated officer leaped up with his murderous knife in hand, a ringing deep-sea hail came down the wind and the two Gilbert Islanders bounded toward the spot from their distant posts.

As their hail echoed through the awakening forest, it was answered with redoubled volume from farther down the line; and now the line runners, having marched all night, leaped into view, emerging from the jungle and speeding over the bare earth like great, brown, shining deer.

With a whoop of joy they swept around their revered skipper. Like a brown ghost one of them seemed to wrap himself about the screaming officer, taking away his knife as easily as he might have taken a stick from a willful child. And the half hundred men who had started forward stopped.

Saunders released the leader from the grip of the sailor, and turned his face toward the hills.

"Pick up your Luger, mister," he said kicking it toward the man. "Gather your men, and forward march! You started this, and I guess you know what to expect if you want to start something again. Don't wait to say good-by."

The crowd of nondescripts began marching up the slopes without waiting for their discomfited leader. He followed them for twenty yards, then turned, shook his fist at the grinning authors of his defeat, and yelled shrilly:

"I know you, Red Saunders! You're laughing now, but wait. You'll get your medicine yet, like the bloody pirate you are! The police want you now, in Palembang."

Saunders roared with merriment. He picked up a rock as big as a baby's head, hurled it with the precision of a bullet, and the man went down with a grunt

under the impact of five pounds of soft limestone in the stomach.

Tomking appeared suddenly from the jungle with the Battaks.

"I thought so," he remarked. "They don't have that kind for officers in the Dutch service."

"Who is he?" demanded Beauchamp.

"One of Kempees & Van Zoom's tools. He's done time on the roads and harbor works chained to others like him. That's all the work he ever did for the government. Those law sharks have a plenty of such birds. Keep 'em to do dirty jobs in return for keeping 'em out of jail again."

Leaving three of the *Black Pearl's* seamen with Kohl to maintain occupancy at the northern end of the territory, the party started on the return march to the other end. An hour of prospecting under Tomking's shrewd guidance revealed enough traces of free gold in the pockets of the stream to promise a profit, and on these the men went to work. Then, on the route back, urged by the suspicion that the invading party knew something, an exhaustive examination was carried out, bringing to light several tracts of outcropping rock which undoubtedly held precious metal, whether in paying quantity or not could only be decided on still more minute inspection.

The return journey, with its many halts and side trips, took up three days. Then the river camp came in sight, with the quarters of the thirty laborers and their dependents ranged semi-circularly in the jungle fringe about it. At sight of the white tent of the girls Red's eyes lighted up softly, and even Beauchamp felt as if he were coming home. Neither man uttered his thoughts, though both experienced a little disappointment at the complete silence surrounding the tent. In the bush the Malays chattered, their women laughed shrilly, their fat babies howled or gurgled, their dogs whined without

barking; but at the tent was neither welcoming song, cheery handwave, or sight of a khaki dress.

"Here, Joey," Saunders called to one of his sailors who was industriously washing clothes before the tarpaulined heap of equipment. The man looked up, then came smiling broadly.

"Where are the missies?"

"Oh, dey take little walk, sar," grinned the man. "Misser Carter he go too. Up dere," pointing toward the crevice from which the source of the river trickled musically. Saunders and his Ruby comrade felt as if relieved of a tremendous load. With the dour old mate the girls were safe. Then the man added an item which put another aspect on the case.

"Lady walk down dis mornin', sar. She very fine lady, ho yis! Dey go 'long wid her. Misser Carter laff lak' anyting."

"All right, Joey. Get us some grub as quickly as you can. Then take ten of the Malays, and pack up stores for half a dozen men for a week, and stand by to take them down the line."

While they ate their dinner, Beauchamp and Saunders made conjectures regarding the strange woman. Neither noticed that Tomking, leaving his remaining cannibal comrade behind, had sneaked up the hills and out of sight. Conjecture seeming idle, they discussed matters of equipment until the stores party had departed.

Finally both men felt a little impatient, if not uneasy, regarding the lengthy absence of the girls. Only Carter's being with them prevented a journey in search of them.

"Here they come," cried Beauchamp at last. The shadows were stretching out, and the hill crests were hazy with the refraction of the sinking sunlight. Carter led the single-file column of four, jaunty and bright of eye. Then Jess, and Bubbles, with, last of all, the strange woman. Beauchamp and Saunders

gazed intently at the stranger, feeling more than a little distrustful of any woman who would venture alone into such a country. But apparently they discovered nothing in the woman, at a distance, anyway, to warrant their distrust.

"By Jove! She's a howlin' beauty!" cried Ruby, dropping his monocle to polish the lens. Saunders laughed good-humoredly.

"Don't let first impressions take charge of you, old hoss. Besides, look at Bubbles."

Beauchamp transferred his gaze with a little guilty start. At sight of Bubbles he realized that he had been staring rudely at the stranger and ignoring her and Jess altogether. Bubbles was looking straight at him, her lovely face registering disdain. She merely nodded as she passed him, and went to the tent. Jess followed her, after greeting the men, excusing herself with the plea that all three women needed to freshen up a bit after the hot day's walk. But before she opened the flap which Bubbles had dropped, to permit the other woman to enter, she introduced her.

"This is Mrs. Rubens—Mrs. Rubens, Captain Saunders, and Mr. Beauchamp. Mrs. Rubens is exploring the hills for fossils," smiled Jess, as she waited for the woman to offer a hand to each of the men and follow her inside the tent.

When the women had gone, Beauchamp looked quizzically at the skipper. Receiving a grin and a nod of invitation in reply, he followed him down to the edge of the stream.

"Did you see her eyes?" Red asked.

"Saw nothing else. Jove! They go right through you! Did she speak?"

Saunders laughed outright.

"I thought you wouldn't know whether she opened her lips or not. Man, you were staring into her face as if you were a little birdie in front of a big, bad boa constrictor. She didn't speak, but she smiled, Ruby, and I'll

bet you're in for a ragging when Bubbles gets you alone again. You ought to be more careful, old chap."

"Oh, stop your chaff, Red." Beauchamp flushed.

## CHAPTER XII.

MRS. RUBENS ate supper with the party, and seemed entirely unconscious of the fact that she was undergoing a close examination across the spread.

"I was so glad to stumble on your camp," she smiled at Saunders. "It has been awfully lonely at times in these beastly hills."

"Must be," agreed Red. He could see the vivid red of her richly full lips, and the vagrant sheen of the departing sun in the masses of her light golden hair. The girls seemed to have fallen under some spell of the woman; Tod Carter, the grim and grizzled, sat just outside the circle, with a grin of admiration on his face that would have been silly in any other man.

"Why don't you hire guides, or join a party?" Beauchamp asked. He moved around to get a light for his pipe from the fire, trying to reach a position from which he might watch her eyes.

"I might join a party or hire attendants if either were like you or your followers," she smiled, turning to Bubbles and patting her arm. "Do you know, I've never seen such a varied, yet harmonious crowd of human beings. I mean your men, of course," she chattered on. "There must be a dozen different types and races among them, to say nothing of the women and babies. How many men have you, not counting the women?"

"Between forty and a hundred. Never could keep account of natives. So much alike, y'know," drawled Beauchamp. "Tomking would know. He's the headman. He's keeping watch on a gang of men who seem to be seeking trouble."

Mrs. Rubens arranged her short

walking skirt about her knees and settled down like a graceful cat before the fire again. She seemed to be thinking.

"You frighten me," she said softly, presently. "I'm scared to go alone to my solitary camp. Would you mind if I stayed here to-night?"

"Of course we don't," replied Jess, quickly, flashing a look of pleading to the skipper. "You can share our tent, if you don't mind crowding."

From the Malays' camp came weirdly soft music of reed flutes and singing; the smoldering fires gave out a pungent aroma of spice twigs and cedar; a gently sighing breeze dispelled the lingering heat of departed day, and the camp stirred with the soft rustle of people preparing to retire for the night.

In the early morning, a party of men started off into the jungle to commence tapping rubber trees. Another smaller party took digging implements and a portable filter along the boundary line, seeking water supplies. When they had gone, the camp breakfast was set, and Red and Ruby, who had confided to each other their mutual distrust of the lady waited with some excusable curiosity for Mrs. Rubens' appearance. If she had failed to appear at all neither would have been greatly surprised; for Tomking had vanished before they awoke, and it was not like him to desert a post allotted to him.

Bubbles first emerged from the tent, and, fresh as a dewy violet, she seemed to have lost in her sleep the coolness which she had shown to Beauchamp the evening before. She greeted him merrily, and he warmed again in the sunshine of her mood. He was beginning to wonder what exactly was the true nature of Miss Muriel Vincent; what to expect at any moment in her was becoming more of a puzzle; and for him this was a serious matter.

He had an inkling of the truth when Jess appeared with Mrs. Rubens, and that inkling gratified rather than

alarmed him. When he had greeted Jess, and turned to bid the guest good-morning, he caught sight of Bubbles' gaze bent upon him.

"By Jove!" he thought almost aloud. "The dear girl's jealous! That's cork-in'! She wouldn't meddle with jealousy unless she cared a bit for a chap."

Breakfast for Ruby Beauchamp was a feast of nectar and ambrosia. He forgot all about Mrs. Rubens and her questionable status in the exchange of keen banter between himself and Bubbles.

"As soon as we get settled a bit more, we must have some good, long talks," he chaffed.

"You'll need a few lessons first," she retorted.

"Something interesting, I hope."

"Maybe. Your caligraphy's all wrong."

Ruby looked puzzled. His monocled eye gazed unwinkingly at her.

"Caligraphy?" he echoed. "That's writin', isn't it? By Jove, Bubbles, I believe you've hit on my weak point. I never could write legibly, y'know." A thought struck him, and he said quickly: "But you've never seen my writin', I'm certain."

"I've seen enough, sir. I don't like the way you make eyes!"

Slowly a grin of understanding spread over his face, and then he fixed her with a look so eloquent of his real feelings, so plainly indicative of their object, that Bubbles lowered her own eyes with a little blush.

"Sweet, fair tutoress," he bantered kindly, "we are confusing caligraphy with anatomy. My writin' can be remedied by buying a typewriter. I vote we change the schedule, and take up anatomy first. When school meets again let's talk of hearts, what?"

But perversely Bubbles refused to meet him on the line she had started to lay out. Although she felt in a mood which should have urged her to wel-

come softly ardent expressions from the man who filled her thoughts far more than she cared to admit, yet she chose to dam the stream with a cold snub.

"You talk like an idiot," she retorted, rising. "I advise you to read up a lesson which will teach you to wait for encouragement before assuming you are entitled to speak of hearts."

She left the group with head held superciliously high; but Ruby detected the hot color in her face by the glimpse he got of her graceful throat and small, dainty ears.

Mrs. Rubens chattered continually, merely making talk, for she uttered nothing worth recording. But her remarkable eyes had been busy; she had seen her hosts and hostesses paired off as naturally as the birds whose mating songs rang in the near jungle. For all Bubbles' willful spark-and-powder moods, there could be no mistaking her leaning toward Beauchamp, nor his feelings toward her. As for Jess and Saunders, they behaved like perfectly mated wedded folks; their affection for each other was frankly open, and their tiffs, if they ever had such, were as hidden as their regard was plain.

"I think I must go now," said Mrs. Rubens when the Fijian appeared to gather up the dishes. I would be grateful, though, if you could let some one walk part of the way with me. I've grown unaccountably nervous since yesterday." She fixed her direct, wide open eyes on Tod Carter, bringing a grin to his rugged old face. Saunders caught the suggestion.

"Tomking!" he called, sharply. Then to the woman: "I'll send my headman with you. He's worth six ordinary men."

"Oh, a native!" she cried with a wriggle of the shoulders. "It's the natives I'm nervous of, captain."

"Very well," smiled the skipper, genially, "I'll come too. Tomking!" he called again.

From somewhere back of the Malays' camp an answering shout came; and in five minutes Tomking appeared, his aspect striking amazement into the group. His dead-straw colored hair was a smear of red earth; his ugly face was doubly ugly with streaks of white and red; his naked body, above and below his loin cloth, was marked like a Kongo witch doctor's, and he grinned through the grotesque dirt mask of his face with the pleasantness of a hungry fiend.

"My God!" gasped Mrs. Rubens, dropping her cigarette and thrusting out her hands as if to ward off an attack. "Won't you please leave that horrid creature behind?"

"Can't," replied Saunders bluntly. "He's the only guide I can trust at present." Beauchamp and the girls were staring open mouthed at the startling figure of Tomking; Saunders, more accustomed to the unusual things of life, stared hard once, then grinned carelessly. "You need not fear him," he said. "I suppose it's a holiday or something with him. He doesn't bite. Are you ready?"

She nodded good-by to Jess and Bubbles without offering her hand, and stepped out beside the skipper with a face full of seething anger which was too intense to be cloaked in a minute. Like a holiday-making demon Tomking danced along in the rear, making absurd signals to Beauchamp and the girls before he sped forward to take the lead. His last signal was more in keeping with a London street urchin's character than the one he had assumed. It was a slow, knowing wink, and the deliberate striking of a forefinger against the side of his shapeless nose three times.

### CHAPTER XIII.

Two miles had been covered before Mrs. Rubens suddenly awoke to the fact that Tomking was leading the way to her camp with the directness and speed of perfect acquaintance.

"Your headman seems to know his way," she smiled up at him. "I haven't given him one direction, but he's right on the track. I believe you've been spying on me."

"I have done no spying myself," he replied to her accusation. "That is a job I dislike. What Tomking has done is a different matter, though. He may easily have been just at your elbow day and night for a week without your knowing it."

She darted a swift look of suspicion up at him, then the heavy lashes shaded her eyes again and she replied:

"That is hardly possible. I have not been here that long."

Saunders thought he detected fear and relief in rapid succession, both in her voice and expression; he watched her more narrowly as Tomking seemed to be casting about in doubt, and the relief was unmistakable.

"Now I am satisfied your man is not a wizard of direction," she laughed. "Call him back, will you? He's missed my camp. See, here it is."

She drew aside a cedar-brush screen ten yards away from the goat path Tomking had picked out, and Saunders glanced in at a perfect little single-handed camp. To outward appearances, that is, it was perfect; and only a keen eye for trifling details would have detected utter lack of camping necessities which made the woman's story yet more doubtful. He noticed, too, that she was anxious rather than amused at Tomking's failure, until the man was recalled and had leaped down from the ledge to which he had climbed.

"You must be warm and tired," she said. "Let me get you a drink?"

"Thanks," he smiled back, looking straight into her eyes. She lowered her heavy lashes in well-simulated confusion which did not fool him. "I would like some coffee, if it's no trouble."

A flash leaped from her eyes, to be immediately concealed.

"I—er—I think you would prefer some brandy, eh?"

"No, thanks," he answered quickly. "I take very little of that sort of stuff. Coffee suits me best. But don't bother, if it's putting you to trouble."

He wanted badly to see if the apparent lack of camp furnishings was as real as apparent. She hesitated for a moment, then her laughter rippled out, girlish and without embarrassment.

"It's foolish of me, I know, captain, but the fact is I am all out of everything except a little brandy. I have to make a trip back for stores to-day. I am going to start just as soon as you are rested."

"I'm not tired, Mrs. Rubens. I'll come with you, shall I?"

"Oh, I couldn't think of letting you do that," she cried. "Why, I have to go right in to the fort for supplies."

Saunders laughed softly, and the warm color crept into her cheeks; her eyes glittered.

"And do you mean you must walk sixty miles over rugged mountains alone before you can eat?" he asked innocently.

"It's not nearly so far as that!"

"I assure you it is. Aren't you a bit out of your way?"

Anger flamed in her face, and gone for the moment was all pretense. She looked darkly at Tomking, sitting motionless in a corner, his imagelike face expressionless and fixed. Her long fingers clenched nervously, and she was about to burst into objection to the manner of Saunders, who lounged easily at her feet, staring up into her face with a look of complete understanding. He forestalled her.

"Come, Mrs. Rubens," he said, sharply, "cards on the table! What is your connection with that party of robbers who were chased off our lines a few days ago?"

"Captain Saunders!" she exclaimed, fiercely. "You use that tone to me?"

I thought a woman traveling alone in this island had only wandering Malays to fear!"

"That's about all," he grinned, "unless a woman traveling alone in this island is not alone but with a gang of crooks."

"I won't hear you! You wouldn't dare insult me like this if Rafael——"

"I suppose Rafael is the chap at the head of the gang, eh? The little squib I kicked off my line, and who was disposed of by one of my cannibals."

"What!" The woman stood as if frozen stiff, her great, fire-specked eyes blazing.

Saunders put his hand on the ground, and started leisurely to rise. He was satisfied with his discoveries, and gave her a word of advice as he got to one knee.

"I hate fighting with a woman, Mrs. Rubens, or whatever your real name is. But I also hate to let anybody, man, woman, or child, upset plans I have formed. If Rafael was the chap in charge of that bunch of land pirates, he's dead. I didn't kill him; I scarcely thought him worth while killing; but he certainly asked for trouble of some kind, and got it. I won't insult your intelligence by explaining word by word my reasons, but I have no doubt you are in with that crowd, and probably Rafael was only one of the little fish of the school. You will be safer if you keep as far as possible away from our outfit; and so will Messrs. Kempees, Van Zoom, Dutch Zim & Company. Harcourt Beauchamp has a clear title to this territory, in spite of what your crooked partners claim; I am employed by him, and so are my men. There's not a chance in the world for any outsider to horn in, and nothing to be got out of us except plenty of hard knocks. Tell the gang that, will you?"

He stood towering over her, smiling sunnily. And for all her worldly veneration of wisdom, that smile deceived her

utterly. She flashed a swift, questioning glance up at him, then laughed, a low, bubbling laugh of understanding.

"I don't pretend to know how you guessed all this," she said. "I have heard that you possess an uncanny knack of getting to the roots of things; but I never believed that you could place two and two together so—so, well, so splendidly wrong. May I speak to you a moment out of sight of that?" she rippled, pointing with a dainty shudder at the lumpish figure of Tomking.

"If you make it brief," he answered. "Don't forget it's sixty miles to the fort, and it must be getting near your dinner hour."

The look she answered him with as she stepped out on the path would have been roguish if it were not for the ineradicable atmosphere of insincerity and guile that seemed to radiate from her. At a distance of twenty yards from her cedar screen, she stopped, laid a hand on his arm, and nodded rearward.

"That was clever of you," she smiled. "That hideous thing you brought along with you gives me the creeps. We don't want him to hear all we talk about, do we?"

"Speak for yourself. What have you to say to me?"

"Oh, don't be so idiotic!" she returned, impatiently. "I know all about you, and you seem to think you know a great deal about me. Why not let us come to an understanding together? It will save us both a lot of time if you will chuck out what's in your mind without pretending to such superiority. You're in this game for money, aren't you?"

"Not a doubt," he grinned.

"So am I. So are the men behind me. You were right in one thing, anyhow, Saunders; I am in with a strong crowd, and we mean to work this ground to the limit. We know quite well that you can make a lot of trouble for us; we don't care a whoop for Beauchamp. He's a

monocled ass. From what I hear, you don't know much about him. Just chance acquaintances, I gather. Why don't you come in with us?" she concluded flatly, meeting his eyes fairly and stepping close to him.

"First let me correct you," he replied. "Beauchamp is far from being an ass, monocled or otherwise. He placed you like a shot. Never mind now what his verdict was; I can assure you he was right. But to come to business, just what are you offering me?"

"That's the way to talk! I wanted you, or if not you, then your grim old mate, or both of you preferably. Come in with the five of us who are handling this business, on equal shares, after expenses are taken out of the gross profits."

"Who determines the profits and expenses? Kempees & Van Zoom?" he laughed.

"Of course. Don't get the idea in your head that they are smart enough to make more than their shares out of the outfit. I have them well in hand. I can handle most men, Captain Saunders, and"—her face was close to his, and he felt her breath on his hand, which was raised to hide the curl of contempt which persisted in spoiling his habitual smile—"and, most men don't mind a bit. Occasionally, even, a man has sought me."

"That I can easily believe," he chuckled. Then he cast off all pretense and banter, and stated with cold incisiveness: "Try elsewhere, my girl. I'm neither for sale nor hire at any price, even with your beauteous self chucked in as a bonus. Perhaps Tomking might—"

"Swine!" she blazed furiously, and with a lightning motion had drawn a small revolver from beneath the camera case at her belt. With a movement as swift as Saunders gripped both her hands in his, one great fist closing down over cylinder and butt of the weapon, crush-

ing her fingers cruelly against the steel trigger guard.

"Let me loose, you red gorilla!" she screamed, fighting viciously with feet and teeth. Without haste he drew her slender wrists together, seized both in one huge fist, and relentlessly unclamped her fingers from the pistol. He gave it a glance of amused contempt before hurling it far out into the scattered brush of the hillside; then, still holding her fast, he said coolly:

"I shouldn't have suggested Tomking; I ought to have referred you to Bang, or Kohl. They'd relish the job of taming you. Anyhow, you trot back to your real camp as fast as you can travel. That's my advice to you. Let your men come and try their luck with us. We can give them satisfaction. And, for your trouble, and in return for the sport you've given me, I'll give you the information you tried so clumsily to get last night. There are in our party Beauchamp and myself, the two ladies, Carter, twelve of my crew, Tomking and two Battaks, thirty Malays and their women, a few babies, and a half dozen dogs or so."

He released her and left her standing as if carved in the living rock, a colorful figure of suffocating rage. When he rejoined Tomking, and found that worthy shaking with grim merriment, he soon learned how exactly true his shot had proved.

"You got home to her all right, cap'n," the man assured him. "She's the vixen of Achin and Medan I told you about."

"And is she the reason for this gaudy smear you're in?" the skipper grinned, relishing fully for the first time the perfection with which Tomking had made himself irrecognizable. Had he seen him except coming in direct answer to a call, Red himself could not have sworn to the man's identity.

"Sure she is," answered Tomking simply.



"Why, do you think she'd take fright if she knew you were here?"

"Perhaps she wouldn't, cap'n; but that don't worry me at all. You leave me to my own little game, will you? Time enough to dig into my thoughts when I don't carry out my duty to you and the bunch, ain't it?"

Saunders conceded the truth of this, and silently led the way back to camp. He was elated in having done as much as he had; and now that all the cards were dealt, it only remained to watch the play. But while the game went on, there were other matters of importance to claim time and close attention, and the first and greatest of these was the collection of gold dust, and the establishment of a line of communication with Padang, the nearest considerable town.

At the camp the girls were alone, busily employed in the preparation of some delectable dish for the evening meal. In the Malay camp the women and babies were also alone, except for the guardianship of a few tail-tucked mongrel curs who seemed never to get fat, but to consist wholly of snarling barks inclosed in bony frames.

"Where's Carter?" Red asked, greeting Jess with a light kiss and Bubbles with a playful pinch of the ear.

"Gone out to look after the water party," replied Jess. "Ruby went into the jungle an hour ago to follow up the rubber tappers. They each took men with them."

"H'm! Ought not to have left you kids alone. Say, girls, don't ever lose sight of your weapons from now on. There's no danger that I can name just now, but things are maturing. One thing you have to watch is, don't permit any stranger, man or woman, to enter the camp without a challenge; and under no circumstances wander away without escort."

Red took Tomking with him and spent some hours in the stream bed seeking for traces of gold. A few

specks were found, but in nothing like such quantity as had been found on the other stream. He returned to the tent almost persuaded that the site might very well be abandoned at least for the time being, and arrived at the camp fireplace in time to hear a panting shout from the boundary line, and to see Kohl leap into view covered from head to foot with dry, caked blood.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

THE Battak told his story twice before Tomking appeared to translate it. Kohl's sinewy body was crisscrossed with bloody lines, scars of knife and bullet, his laboring chest told of stupendous exertions put forth to combat growing weakness.

"Your sailors are killed, cap'n," Tomking said when Kohl had repeated his story. "The party you drove off appeared again in charge of a white-haired man, and started shooting without a word. Your men sent Kohl to get help, when they were all three badly hurt. You see that he didn't shirk much, don't you. He found Carter and sent him forward with his party, and came on here to us. It's too late, though. The shooting had stopped before Kohl topped the first rise."

Saunders glanced at the girls. Jess was shocked, but her fair face showed no alarm; her clear gaze met his trustfully. And Bubbles, less inured to the raw facts of life beyond the sharp lines of established law and order, nevertheless possessed sufficient courage to enable her to repose confidence in her more experienced friends.

"Do you mind staying here until Ruby can get back?" Saunders asked Jess. "The women need somebody with them."

"Of course not!" Bubbles cut in quickly. The question had been put to Jess, but she had intercepted the cross glances from Red to Jess which showed

clearly that it was of her they were thinking. "I'm not afraid, Red. Go on and get after those murderers."

"We can manage all right," smiled Jess. "Besides, Kohl needs attention before he can walk another step."

"He needs nothing more," Tomking remarked curtly. The Battak had collapsed on the ground, and Tomking had been busy washing his hurts. Now the man hobbled to his feet like a dog after a fight, quite ready to tackle another one, or to run ten miles, leaving the cure of his wounds to mother Nature.

"All right then," decided Saunders, seizing his rifle and buckling on an extra belt of cartridges. "Can he find the rubber party and tell them to get back here at once?"

"Sure he can." Tomking uttered instructions in the Battak dialect and without another word the man sped away into the jungle. With his keen gray eyes alight with the genuine appreciation of a brave man, Saunders watched him disappear; then he bade Tomking take a rifle, to reinforce the knife and revolver the man insisted on placing his reliance in.

"Look after yourself, girls," he said as he turned away. "Ruby won't be long, I hope. But remember what I told you a while ago; let nobody enter the camp unchallenged, and if you have to shoot do it sharp and straight. Come on, Tomking."

It was late afternoon when Tomking leaped to the summit of a grassy rise and paused, scanning the slopes of the hills and the dark edge of the jungle. Saunders climbed up beside him.

"What do you see?" he asked impatiently.

"See nothing, but thought I heard shots."

"It wasn't back at camp, d'you think?" he hesitated, as they started again.

"No. Out there," said Tomking, flinging a hand toward the bush. •

Out there a score of men had gone, and Beauchamp was with them. Ahead lay the real, tangible danger. Ruby must hold up his own end if unsuspected trouble came his way.

"By Godfrey!" grunted Saunders after thirty minutes of strenuous marching, "this is no sort of voyaging for sea-legs!"

The path they followed was only a path because they trod it. Loose boulders scattered broadcast over barren flats of outcropping rock tripped them; stretches of slippery moss made each step a slide; occasional patches of vegetation sprouting from the shallow earth of the hills seemed possessed of all the devils of thorn and vine known to the Tropics. And a moonless night fell upon them, adding darkness to the already superfluous obstacles of the journey.

Suddenly Tomking stopped short, then leaped back beside the skipper, laying a finger on his lips.

"Don't make a sound—just sniff," he whispered.

Around them the land lay dark and devoid of sound or odor. What sparse vegetation there was gave forth no fragrance; but, after a moment of sniffing there came to them the faintest of wood-smoke aromas. It was the merest whiff, lasting scarcely long enough to be detected; but it was there, and where smoke was fire might be expected—fire, and the men who made it. Tomking slipped away into the darkness toward the lower ground, leaving the skipper standing in alert expectancy, his rifle following with its muzzle the direction from which came the smoke.

Minutes seemed like hours in that weird barren land, but finally Tomking glided to his side as silently as he had vanished, and only a quick word of caution prevented the skipper hurling himself upon the man.

"What is it?" he gritted, peering hard to try to read the other's face.

"Fire kicked out. Some coffee in a calabash still warm. A party of some sort just entered the jungle going east."

"You saw them?"

"No. I heard 'em. Too far off to follow, without you telling me to. Shall I?"

"Leave them to Beauchamp," he decided. "Forward for us."

They started, and through the night they never rested again. With the eastern treetops turning from black to olive, and from olive to green in the rising dawn, they dropped down from the higher ground and entered the jungle as the hillside glowed into light and the river came in sight. There was no sound of trouble; the birds of the jungle alone broke the warm, misty stillness of a perfect morning.

"Wonder where Carter's got to," observed Saunders. The ribbon-wide stream, the misty hills, the awakening forest, all lay bare of human presence; even the bodies he had expected to see lying about the little camp site were not in evidence. But the moment he stepped out into the open, walking toward the spot on the stream which he had set his men to work upon, one of Carter's sailors stepped from the shelter of a miniature cliff and grounded his rifle butt. For once the islander was not smiling.

"Misser Carter he go wid all 'ands down ribber," he said.

"What for? What's happened? Where are the men they killed?" Saunders put the queries with impatience.

"We bury Sammee an' Tommee an' Billee. Misser Carter go for find out who shootin' at us when we dig holes. Somebody shootin' all de time from jungle, cappen. We no see nobody when we git here. I t'ink maybe you was look for shoot me, so I not comin' out too soon."

"Shooting from the jungle, hey?" He glanced at Tomking questioningly. That shrewd bushman shook his head.

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"It wasn't anybody we heard," he said. "Those shots I thought I heard soon after we started could easily have been real, but not from anybody who could possibly reach here for a long time yet. It's somebody else. Want me to trail the mate?"

"Better eat, then sleep," he suggested, turning from his scrutiny of the hills to Tomking. Tomking curled up like a big dog, ready to sleep.

It was then, perhaps for the first time, that Saunders realized fully the size of the thing he was up against. If the shots heard far back at the beginning of the line were indeed real, then there was another party of intruders there; for it was certain that the shots had not come from any of his own party. And he did not believe that the gang of bush cutters he had seen could be the same as those shots were coming from now, or had been while his men were being buried. He grinned at his solitary wakeful companion, the solemn-faced sailor, and remarked:

"So here we are, just you and me, Petey. Suppose come 'long big gang of bad fellows, hey?"

"All right," said Petey, indifferently. "S'pose he come, he go back quick, hey?"

A parrot ravaging a banana bunch by the streamside stopped eating fruit to squawk raucously.

Out from the shadows of a wide ledge set in a rolling grass flat stepped a line of men, half a mile away, and without sound or sign to indicate that they were interested in Saunders or his business started work with pick and spade down by the trickle of water which represented the beginning of the river. Through his pocket glasses the skipper watched them closely for some minutes, seeking to identify faces, and to see what sort of man appeared to be in command.

"Same bunch!" he muttered, snapping the glasses back into the case. "The

bush cutters, all right; but nobody seems to be in charge. Seen them before, Pete?" he asked suddenly.

"No," grinned Petey. Then: "I t'ink maybe dey all the same fella what march quick away when yo' kick dat off'cer man."

"They are. Did you see them when you arrived with the mate?"

"No. We see nobody. Only somebody shootin' from de bush. No see nobody, only Sammee an' Tommee an' Billee, dead."

To give every cause for interference, if such were intended, the skipper and his single sailor took up the tools of the dead gold washers and went to work in the bed of the stream. They worked steadily for an hour, taking out a small amount of gold, without arousing any visible interest in the distant working gang. The skipper was satisfied. He awakened Tomking.

"Get after Carter now," he said. "Bring all hands back here unless they're too busy. This is a trick to lead us all into the bush, and that peaceful bunch up there is part of the trick. Hurry back. I'll take a nap while you're gone."

Three hours passed, and Saunders woke refreshed, to find matters as he had left them. Then, shortly after he had waded into the stream in the effort to obtain a view of its lower course, Carter and his men marched into the open, with Tomking in the rear, every man wearing a grim, vengeful expression.

"Like looking for a needle in hay to search that bush for men," growled the mate, wiping the perspiration from his red face.

"No luck?"

"Not for us. Shoot, shoot, shoot, and devil a rifle or man could we see. Look at the men! Ain't one of 'em that ain't pipped somewhere."

"Make camp," Saunders ordered. "We'll go right to work here. Let a

couple of runners beat back along the line and bring the rest of the outfit here. Until they arrive, we'll work the stream and see if we can draw these skunks from cover. You, Tomking, keep Bang with you, and make him believe there's no man in the jungle whose head won't come off if he slashes at it hard enough. I believe the man's scared of spooks, or something."

"Not of spooks, cap'n, but snakes," returned Tomking with a grin.

"Bosh! What snakes are there here to be afraid of?"

"None that we know of; but Bang swears he saw a cobra slithering through the leaves—a king cobra at that."

"That's nonsense," snorted the skipper angrily. "King cobras may exist over on the Malay side, but not in Sumatra."

Tomking told Bang this, but the little man was unconvinced. He chattered volubly in retort, and Tomking translated:

"He's sure it was a kerait he saw. He's seen 'em plenty of times over in the peninsula, and swears he can't be mistaken."

As if in proof of Bang's assertion, one of the Malay's suddenly uttered a scream, leaped high in the air, and fell groveling on the earth, holding his leg with both hands and glaring affrightedly up at Saunders. As the man fell, Tomking sprang forward, slashed with his knife at something in the rocks, and speared it with his blade. He held aloft the squirming length of an evil, flat-headed cobra.

Shocked though he was, Saunders acted swiftly and with decision. Flinging himself upon the stricken Malay, he got out his pocket medicine case and took a razor-edged lancet.

"Here, Carter, get out the permanganate of potash," he snapped. With one great hand gripping the struggling Malay's leg, with the other he wielded

the lancet and slashed into the quivering flesh cruelly. Deaf to the man's frenzied shrieks he took the potash from Carter, poured the crystals into the bleeding wound, and rubbed them into the raw flesh. Then from his pocket flask he poured a half pint of brandy down the man's throat, and got up.

"Tie his leg tight above the knee," he said, "and keep him moving. Lucky it happened here."

He looked around, knowing that cobras usually hunt in pairs. But no second creeping terror appeared. Only up on the hillside was his gaze arrested.

The working gang, a few minutes earlier indifferent to him and all his works, had ceased their toil, and now stood eagerly scanning the scene just enacted.

## CHAPTER XV.

IN a ravine under the shadow of Ophir mountain an elaborate tent village sat. A big square tent occupied the center of a sward whose close, fine turf recalled those miracles of grass seen in the college quads of Oxford; around it were arranged a half dozen army bell tents, and beyond these again a score or more of "A" tents lay in a semi-circle. A white man in a dress closely patterned after a military uniform lounged on a tall rock against the sheer side of the ravine in an attitude of indolent ease sharply belied by his swift, eagle glance to all sides. He sprang into alert life at the call of a woman's voice from inside the big tent.

"Is there no sign of Zimmerman yet?"

"No, ma'am," the man answered. "And nothing in sight from below, either."

There was a flutter at the tent flap, and Mrs. Rubens stepped out to gaze around in annoyance.

"Verdant Bathsheba!" the man growled under his breath. His eyes glittered coldly after her as she stepped

across the grass and took the path up the ravine.

Conscious only of the outward exhibition of servility which her presence drew from the men who sprang up as she passed, the woman strode along with her head proudly erect and a smile of scornful superiority on her undoubtedly handsome face. At the brink of a bubbling spring she sat down, crossed her feet lazily, and lay back against a mossy bank. With a cigarette in her slim fingers she waited with forced patience for her overdue visitor.

A clattering shower of dust and small stones aroused the woman from her waking-doze, and at the upper end of the defile a column of men appeared. In a flash she was all vivacity. Flinging her half-burned cigarette into the spring with the carelessness of a woman to whom the trail and camp were but a necessary nuisance, she scrutinized the approaching party with eager intensity.

The procession was yet too far away for faces to be distinguishable, but as the figures filed down against the skyline they were recognizable to her expectant eye. First came a dozen sturdy white fellows dressed like the sentinel in the camp. The sun glinted on the steel of weapons, their backs were humped uncouthly with the burdens of marching soldiers. Only a vague suggestion of disorderliness in their gait would perhaps arouse a doubt as to their real character. Next behind them trotted four pairs of lean, turbanned natives, each pair carrying a long shoulder pole to which swung a large cane basket securely tied with grass rope. Then four riders stumbled down the slope on tiny Timor ponies, sunburnt Europeans in stout khaki, armed, putted, and sun-helmeted. The rear was brought up by a body of mixed Malay and Chinese nondescripts, their only similarity to the rest lying in the arms they carried, and their packs.

"Now Red Saunders, we'll see what

"you'll do!" the woman cried aloud, waving a triumphant hand in greeting to the four riders who separated themselves from the others and galloped forward to meet her.

"Hullo, Sara!" the foremost cried, sliding from his pony and seizing her hand.

"I'm delighted to see you again," she smiled, and gave a hand to each of the other three men. "But where is Dutch?" She glanced along the approaching line, and looked inquiringly at the man who had first accosted her. "You haven't left him behind, have you, major?"

"For the time being, yes. Said he had important business to finish up, or something."

"Business; stuff! I believe the man's frightened," retorted the woman.

"What of?" The man she addressed as major stared into her face curiously. The other three men with him closed around them, their expressions hinting at a desire for explanations. "What can he be afraid of?" repeated the major. "He knows quite well what we're after, doesn't he?"

Sara flashed a glance at the halted column, and said quickly: "Don't stop here. Get the men into camp. We'll talk over things while you're having something to eat. Come."

It was a formidable little army, in numbers, that mustered on the grassy sward to be told off to the "A" tents. Only the turbanned natives with their baskets, under escort of four armed whites, continued on down the ravine to the foothills. Those remaining speedily settled down, like hardened campaigners, and fires sprang up along the cliff-side under bubbling cooking pots. In front of the big tent the four leaders of the band ate their lunch with the woman at the only table in the camp, and she answered their questions concerning the fancied or real reasons for Dutch Zim's sudden fright.

"I may be wrong," she smiled, enigmatically. "Until I met this Saunders I would have believed there was nothing for us to fear. But he's rather a puzzle to me. He's different from any man I've met before. I don't think he's the sort to be frightened away."

"That's a lot of rot," exclaimed the major. "We can chase any man away with the crowd we have. If you haven't given us the wrong steer altogether, I shouldn't wonder if Beauchamp's natives are in a funk now."

"I've given you no wrong steer," the woman cried, angrily. "I've done my part. The natives, or some of them, are scared; but the three whites, and the two girls, don't scare as easily as I expected. Dutch Zim evidently knows that."

"Oh, there are girls, eh?" smiled a younger man with a precociously evil face. "That promises interest."

"Shut up, Corny!" snapped the major. "You and Blum, and Rivi, are here to play a man's game, not to look googoo-eyed at girls."

"Seems to me dot's th' proper game for mans," drawled Blum. The major scowled blackly at him, and persisted:

"But what about Dutch Zim? What do you mean by saying he may be frightened?"

"Well, he was so savagely eager to swing in with me that he has even double crossed his own partners, I believe. Now he hangs back when everything looks ready and open. You ought to have brought him with you. I believe he's scared of this big tough, Saunders, and I don't wonder at it, since I've met the auburn gentleman. I don't trust Dutch!"

There was a brief silence while tobacco was lighted, then Sara leaned her elbows on the table and related what had happened along Beauchamp's border line.

"And that red-headed beast of a Saunders laughed in my face and scorned

me!" she said savagely. Her slim fingers twisted and twined in the stuff of her dress, and her breast rose and fell agitatedly. "I have a mind to try my luck with the other brick-topped fool."

"Well, let's get down to business," said the major. "Then perhaps you and I can find something less weighty to talk about. What is exactly the situation down there at present?"

"I'm waiting for a messenger now. The last one, this morning, reported a good start made. Three of the crew of Saunders' schooner were put out of business, and those are the men we must look out for. The rest are only Malay laborers, and easily run off. They have women with them, too, and kids, so it won't be long before we put the fear of death into them and send them scotching back home. Then we have a party of six Dyaks with two of Zim's special gunmen at present beating up toward the rubber tappers Saunders sent out to work. Another bunch of twelve are with old Harlem Job putting the shakes into the bunch at the gold camp. Saunders must have flown to get there as quickly as he did. He rather spoiled the game, but at that the cobras we had have been turned loose, and one of his Malays got bitten."

"That's good! The rest got a fright, hey?"

"Not so bad as they ought. That redhead is a regular man, for all that he's a nuisance to us. He had that bitten nigger down and filled with permanganate of potash in less time than it had taken the snake to bite him, and the man's cured. What's more to the point, the snake's killed. That clay-smear'd devil-dancer, or whatever he is, killed the brute with a knife."

"From what I can see, that Saunders chap is no easy mark," observed Corny. "Is he the only one of that kind?"

"Not at all," replied Sara sharply. She was uneasy under the major's per-

sistent gaze. "Beauchamp is as tough, though he isn't so used to tight places as Saunders. As for old Carter, the schooner's mate, well, I thought him easy until I had a chance to study him more. He's just a whipcord and whale-bone old sailor without imagination and without nerves. None of those three men is scarable by ordinary means. We have to work on the Malays and make it impossible for Beauchamp to work his land, and there's none too much time, either."

"Oh, it won't take long," Rivi put in, coldly. "We brought sixteen she cobras, all fat, and they'll get to work very quickly after those Hindoo chaps turn 'em loose. Only thing we have to worry about is seeing that none of our people go into the bush without boots and leggins."

"When do we move down to the ground?" asked Corny.

"As soon as we get word that Beauchamp's crowd are all on the spot," returned the major, curtly. He rose, nodded to Sara, and she followed him down the ravine away from the camp. At the foot of a precipitous pinnacle of volcanic rock he paused, looked about him sharply, and perched himself on a ledge, with his back to the sheer face.

"Sit down and let us talk over things," he said.

Sara took a seat, leaning slightly against his shoulder, and smiled up into his eyes with a world of subtle allure in her own. Some of the unpleasant quality passed out of his expression in the warmth of her near presence; but the man seemed to be laboring under some deep uneasiness which would not permit him to show an entirely pleasant face.

"What things are left to talk about, except ourselves?" she laughed.

"It is of ourselves, or rather you, I mean to speak. One thing I insist that you remember is that I won't have you

casting sheeps' eyes at other fellows, understand?"

"My major is jealous!" she cried, mockingly. "You poor, poor boy. Will you not understand that I have eyes for none but you? If I smile on our enemies, is it not to their misfortune? Must I tell you again that I am yours, and yours only?" She swiftly wreathed her arms about his neck, pulled down his head, and fastened her lips to his in a passionate kiss. The man shuddered, his eyes gleamed fiercely, and he crushed her yielding body to him; but he was still master of himself.

Far down the ravine sounded a challenge and an answer, and the woman twisted around to look. A native leaped from rock to level, waving a hand aloft at a sentinel sharply outlined against the blue sky.

"It is the messenger we are waiting for," she said, flashing her companion the softest of smiles.

"Come, then," he replied, "we will take his report at the camp. The others want to hear it."

They returned to the tents, arm in arm; and on the summit of the rock beneath which they had sat, a white sentry in a semimilitary dress crouched, peering after them with a demon of hate in his glittering eyes.

## CHAPTER XVI.

Down at the main camp Jess and Bubbles waited for Beauchamp's appearance with growing concern. The native camp was murmurous with softly whining children and hushed-voiced women; even the nonedescript curs ceased to yelp for endless food or yap at stinging insects. A praying mantis, devouring a fly on an orchid cup, appeared to be the only normal living creature in sight.

It seemed hours before Kohl broke out of the jungle at the head of Beauchamp's party, and by that time the

night shadows stretched far and black. A shrill chattering from the women told the Malays in one terrific chorus of the events down the line; and Ruby, emerging from the bush last of all, self-constituted rear guard against the as yet unseen peril, met two girls whose serious faces warned him that matters might not be quite well.

"By Jove, girls!" he ejaculated humorously, "everybody's blue and full of shakes, by appearances. Old Kohl came hot foot after us, and jabbered a lot o' stuff about killin' and that sort o' thing, but for the life of me I can't understand a half of what he's gassin' about. What is it? You both look grumpy."

"Come in to supper," suggested Jess, quietly. "Better not let the men see we're worried. They're inclined to see danger in shadows, you know."

During the meal the girls told him what had happened and his face grew serious for once. Fearless as he was, he could yet see in Saunders' sudden departure, leaving the two girls alone practically, grounds for deep cogitation. With the men at his disposal he felt that the camp and stores were amply secured; but merely to have heard the news of the deaths of three of the skipper's trusty Gilbert Islanders drove out his buoyant spirits and darkened his soul with gloom.

"And we are to stay here?" he queried hopelessly.

"For the present," Jess replied. "I think our best plan always is to follow Red's instructions, until we see, at least, that things are desperate."

Ruby glanced at her with warm admiration in his grave eyes.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, his monocled eye fixed directly upon her face, causing her to color a little. "By Jove! You are the most loyal young person I ever met, Jess. No wonder your guardy, or adopted daddy, or whatever Saunders is, is proud of you!"



Jess' eyes opened wide, and her rosy mouth formed a circle.

"Oh!" she gasped. Then she stared hard at Bubbles, their eyes met, and she laughed merrily, while Bubbles, the picture of a person groping in darkness, first stared back at her friends, then flashed a look of question at Ruby, and finally assumed a look of petulant annoyance.

"I'm sure I don't know in the least what amuses you," she said, distantly.

Jess hastened to smooth her chum's ruffled plumage, and soon the girls retired to their tent, leaving Beauchamp to smoke his pipe out before seeking his own blanket.

"Rum set-out," he muttered, puffing fiercely at his pipe. "Old Saunders seems to be satisfied to go ahead, but it's a shame to drag the girls into a mess like this." The train of thought transferred his serious consideration from the enemy outside to the guests within, and he rose to seek his blanket, with the resolve that he would see about sending the girls back to civilization immediately day dawned.

As he lay, more wakeful than when he lay down, his handsome face wore a smile which became brighter and less repressible with every thought of Bubbles and her little mannerisms. Her flaring anger and quick recovery of spirits, her petulance, childish at times, with his carefree attitude toward her when in one of her most seriously angry moods: all these went to form a delicious picture before his mind's eye.

An uneasy slumber smothered Ruby Beauchamp just before dawn broke, leaving his mind still puzzling over matters. The first gray light had not turned to the flush of the true dawn when Saunders' messenger sneaked into the camp, gave his identity to the sentinel, and aroused Beauchamp to the knowledge of big things a-brewing. A hasty breakfast was followed by a doubly hasty striking of camp, and a stores-

and-lumber laden march over the foothills trail to the northward.

It was about ten o'clock by sun time when a rear-guard scout announced that a column of fire had risen above the site of their lately vacated camp.

"There goes our material!" laughed Ruby uneasily. He screwed his monocle more tightly into his eye, and faced the girls. Until that moment he had forgotten all his problems of the sleepless night before; now he saw, in all its nakedness, the grimness of the business ahead, and with it came again the conviction that he must secure the girls against further danger, no matter at what cost to his own affairs.

"Look here, girls," he said, "I'm going to escort you to some safe place. There's going to be a mess here, and I won't have you mixed up in it. We'll cross the hills and go to the fort, what?"

"Without Red?" Jess demanded hotly. In a moment her warmth passed, leaving her pretty face smooth and smiling. Bubbles looked her complete accord with her chum, though she uttered no word. Jess went on, quietly: "Better do as he suggests, Mr. Beauchamp. It's usually best, in the end."

"By Jove, I believe you're right, Jess. I always forget that you have acquired an unbreakable faith in Saunders' infallibility."

He gave the order to resume the march, and the girls swung forward in the midst of the line, himself at the head.

## CHAPTER XVII.

A WEARY party camped that night, for the pace had told upon the girls and the packs had borne down the carriers. But Jess and Bubbles had both insisted that the march be made without unnecessary loitering, and Beauchamp was glad to agree with them. Not until nine o'clock were the girls able to retire to their little tent, to snatch what rest they could in preparation for an early re-

start. Jess lay drowsily awake, listening amusedly to the turning and twisting of her chum, whose horror of creeping and hopping things, as suggested by Ruby, was too strong to permit her to woo sleep in peace.

"Ugh! the brute!" cried Bubbles with an audible shudder.

"Found something?" drawled Jess, sleepily.

"No!" snapped Bubbles, angrily. "I was referring to him."

"Him?" queried Jess, innocently.

"Oh, you know whom I mean. I think he's a beast!"

Jess lay quiet for several minutes, and the deep, agitated breathing of her friend set the blankets rustling.

"You treat him shamefully, Bubbles," Jess said presently. "You deserve to be made to shiver. Why do you hate Ruby so? He's a good sort."

"I know he is, I know he is, and I don't hate him—I—I—love him, Jess," Bubbles blurted passionately, "but I can't let him see it, can I?"

"Seems to me that would be the simplest thing to do," came back in muffled tones, and Jess went peacefully to sleep, leaving her chum covering a burning face with her blanket, and trying to persuade herself that she had not made that important confession.

But with the commencement of another day's march, her old irrepressible spirit of teasing reasserted itself; she was again the mischievous imp of the party, ever trying by speech and gesture to irritate the leader. Somehow Beauchamp had contrived either to cast her from his mind altogether, or to assume a clever appearance of having done so; for he paid her less attention than he gave to his bearers, and Jess received more than a fair share of consideration.

"Hello, Ruby, you're just in time to preside as judge at a funeral," Saunders said quietly. He had warmly welcomed the girls, given a kindly word to the perspiring laborers and their tired

womenfolk, and now gave Beauchamp a brief, thorough review of what had happened.

"That's a Mick's metaphor, old chap," smiled the ruby one in response. "One doesn't judge a funeral, y'know, like a horse-show. What's the bally joke?" He had taken in the general aspect of the camp with keen, anxious eyes, and a sort of sixth sense told him that there was a deep undercurrent of uneasiness running beneath the exterior calm of the party. Two brawny seamen standing apart from the rest, at the edge of the jungle, leaned on their rifles with an attempt at apparent ease, but failed to convey that impression of ease to the sharp eye peering through the monocle. Saunders hesitated until Jess and Bubbles had walked away a few yards, then said with a grimness that contrasted strongly with his usual manner:

"There's no joke about this, Ruby. We've collared the white-haired old villain who killed my three sailors."

"By Jove! That is good news. Where is the rotter?"

"Over there, along with three of his gang. We slipped in behind them a couple of hours ago, while they were taking potshots at us from cover. I want to know what you propose doing with them now you're here."

"Oh, I don't want to interfere, Red. Go ahead on whatever you intended."

"Come over and see them," replied Red, shortly. Then, at the edge of the bush, he said: "'Ware snakes, old chap. Forgot to mention them. The bush is crawlin' with 'em."

Suddenly Beauchamp saw the cause of that vague uneasiness he had sensed in the camp. Even the false ease of the two seamen became a justifiable thing.

"Snakes?" he echoed, halting abruptly. He feared snakes as he feared nothing else on earth. "Surely you're mistaken."

"No, I'm not. I've seen two men

bitten myself. One, our own man, I saved; the other, one of the murdering gang, pegged out. They're cobras, and they've been dumped here to chase us out. Come and take a look at the hoary old scoundrel responsible."

"By Jove! the chap ought to hang!" ejaculated Ruby, angrily.

"Just what he would have done had you been half an hour later," grinned Saunders.

The white-haired leader of the captured marauders looked up curiously as Beauchamp stared down at him. He presented a queer study in types, along with his men. His face was smooth and pink, his eyes wide and almost innocent in expression, his hair snowy and long like the hair of a patriarch; but beneath the outward expression lay a stinging suggestion of evil.

"Well, gentlemen, what's the verdict?" he drawled. "Better finish me off before the rest of the crowd get here, or else you'll be the victims instead of me."

"What are you doing here, anyhow?" demanded Beauchamp. "Did you bring the snakes here?"

"Don't waste time with him, Ruby," put in Saunders impatiently. "Of course he brought the snakes. I told you that."

"By Jove! We ought to hang him!" Beauchamp exclaimed again.

"Better get busy then," laughed the prisoner evilly. "You have just about time enough to find a tree and run me up before your own hour strikes here for good."

"Come," jerked Saunders, moving away abruptly. Beauchamp hesitated. A leering grin of triumph spread over the pink face of the old scoundrel on the ground.

"Sort o' scares you, hey?" he grinned. "Don't dare hold that little hanging bee, hey? Better turn me loose, mister. Your time's about up here."

"No, I won't do that just yet," re-

turned the skipper, taking Beauchamp's arm and leading him away. "I'll leave you tied, and have you carried farther into the jungle. Perhaps I'll turn you loose later. Meanwhile the snakes will keep you amused, no doubt."

A sharp order sent the two sentries with help to carry the four deeper into the recesses of the concealing bush; and the alacrity they showed in returning was proof enough of the fear that had entered the camp since those snakes appeared.

"I think that'll punish them as hard as hanging," the skipper remarked. "Shouldn't care to be in their shoes myself."

"Nor I," Beauchamp agreed with a shudder. "But what can we do with the brutes after all? Can't really hang 'em, can we?"

"You'd better believe we can do anything, Ruby. That's why I suddenly brought you away from that old reprobate yonder. It struck me that he was rather cocksure about our time being almost up. I don't think he was bluffing."

"You think——"

"I think we shall see more of the delightful Mrs. Rubens very shortly," said Saunders as they emerged from the jungle. Tomking's gone away into the hills to scout around. Better make up your mind what line to follow, old chap. Did you leave a guard back at the other stream to look after the gear?"

"No," Beauchamp acknowledged with a guilty grimace. "I left nobody. Now there's nothing left to guard. Somebody set fire to it as soon as we left. We saw the smoke."

The skipper grinned cheerfully.

"It's just as well, perhaps. Leaves us more men at this end, Ruby. And it's a lot better to have our stuff burned on the dump instead of after it's erected, eh? It proves, too, that there are rascals down that end as well as here. I'm

sorry now we let the Malays bring their women along."

"Can't we send 'em back, at least to the boats?"

"D'you think they'd chance that jungle now there are snakes about? The only way would be to take 'em over to the other bank. Seems to me that these cobras have only been chucked into our camp."

"I vote we do that," Beauchamp said, earnestly. "I'm not as wise in this sort of thing as you are, skipper, but I seem to feel in my bones that something's about due to happen. I suggested to Jess and Bubbles that I take 'em over to the fort, but——" His gesture told Saunders the rest as clearly as words.

"Of course they wouldn't quit," Red said with a grin. "It's the Malays with their babies I was thinking of. I told you at first that Jess and Bubbles would stick like glue. But let's see what Carter has to say. He seems to be bursting with news."

Tod Carter appeared from the tumbled foothills, perspiring and hurried. His manner contrasted strongly with the attitudes of his smiling seamen, who carried on their allotted tasks like machines. He bounced down over the rocky declivity, careless of limb, indifferent to bruises, with his mouth and eyes wide open.

"Hey, skipper, come up here!" he barked hoarsely, halting as soon as he realized how near he had come to the camp. Saunders and Ruby sprang forward, and the mate at once turned again and led them at a rattling pace up the slopes until he reached a sharp right-angled turn in the face of the hillside.

"Look at that!" he panted, and pointed far down a narrow defile toward the looming mountains.

The skipper took out his binoculars, and gazed long and intently. Winding around a turn in the undistinguishable trail from the mountains swung a procession of twelve men. Eight of them,

white-clad and turbanned, bore great baskets slung to long shoulder poles; four whites, armed, stumbled along with them, two ahead, two following. A hundred yards behind them, displaying what seemed to be extreme caution, two white men rode slowly along on small ponies, halting every few paces as if fearful of attracting attention from those men in front. As the pair of riders entered the field of his glasses, Saunders uttered an astonished growl and rubbed his eyes, giving the glasses to Beauchamp.

"What d'you make of it?" he grunted.

Ruby stared long and narrowly, then said simply:

"What's the bally excitement, Red? It's only old Tomking comin' back with a stranger."

"Tomking, the Devil!" Saunders snatched the glasses. Before he could pick up the spot again, however, a double turn of the trail brought all three parties in view at the same time, though neither could see the other. "It's Dutch Zim!"

"And Tomking too," added Beauchamp.

"Yes, an' that no good mate o' yours what you put into hospital, Dan Mallet!" growled Carter, savagely.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THE procession of three separate parties disappeared again, as the trail wound in serpentine fashion, and did not appear for fifteen minutes, when the leaders, the two forerunners of the basket carriers, suddenly emerged at a point on the stream side and halted. They obviously were not expecting to find Saunders and his entire party in bold view in the open, for they vanished backwards as swiftly as they had appeared.

Through the clear air came shouts and cries, not to be distinguished as anything particularly except the sounds of wordy conflict. Then Dutch Zim and

Dan Mallet stepped forward, stared, and as suddenly bobbed back. Now their growling voices could be heard, mingling with the sharper cries heard before. Saunders and his friends stood their ground, anxious at first, later amused, curious concerning what might ensue.

"The plot thickens, by Jove!" grinned Ruby, rubbing his hands gleefully. "What part of our appearance d'you suppose is so alarming as to make 'em all bob back that way?"

"Search me," muttered Saunders. "Perhaps Dan Mallet got chilly feet at sight of us. Wait and see."

The skipper and Beauchamp walked away from the others and stood on the brink of the river, watching the spreading banks which might so easily contain a navigable body of water, but in which, now, trickled the merest of runlets fed by the tiniest of brooks.

"This dodging time gets on my nerves," complained Ruby.

"I'm only dodging time until Tomking gets back. I have a lot of faith in the chap." Red scanned the stream regretfully: "Ifs are the excuses of beaten men, Ruby, but this old river would certainly be more encouraging with more water in it."

"That seems to be an unavoidable drawback, doesn't it?"

"Apparently. Anyhow, we'll do as you suggest. Let's get all hands busy and make a camp that looks permanent at least. It will give Jess and Bubbles a sense of comparative security. Come along with me first of all. We'll take some of my crew, who are steady of nerve, and beat the bush for snakes. There can't be so many of 'em, I suppose."

Saunders and Ruby led the way into the jungle, beating every bush, routing out holes in the rocky ground, perhaps a bit nervous at first. Confidence grew as they progressed without results, and the peril seemed almost at the vanishing point. Then they were abruptly brought

to a creepy halt by a scream of deadly fear in the thick forest ahead.

"The prisoners!"

Saunders uttered the words as he plunged through a cane brake, and Beauchamp tore after him.

The prisoners had been left to themselves, tied to trees, and in ordering his men to carry them farther into the bush the skipper had omitted to specifically set a guard over them. Now a dramatic little piece of byplay, fast merging into tragedy, burst upon their view as they entered the level glade in which the captives lay.

The white-haired old scoundrel who had been responsible for introducing the creeping horror into the quiet jungle crouched with his back to a tree, knees drawn up to his chin, his bound hands working frenziedly at his bonds, and his smooth, pink face a mask of panic. In front of him stood a Malay laborer, and in his right hand he held a cleft stick, at the fork of which squirmed and hissed a four-foot king cobra, the open mouth and venomous fangs within six inches of the old man's terror-stricken eyes.

"Drop that!" roared Saunders, and leaped forward with outstretched hand. But he was too late. The cobra struck, and the man's howl rang piercingly through the forest glades. The Malay dropped the stick, and ground the snake's head beneath his sandaled heel, then looked up and met the skipper's angry eyes with a shrug of the shoulders.

"He make snake kill my brudder," he remarked simply, and turned away.

Saunders made no reply. None seemed called for. It was justice, crude but rigid, and he realized it. Curtly bidding Beauchamp cut the victim's bonds, he got out his lancet and went swiftly to work to do what might be possible to avert death. But now his efforts proved futile. The old man's ruddy face turned pale, and his eyes

hardened, while the full red lips quivered piteously. The man winced, but uttered no cry, when the permanganate bit into the wounds; he waited until the skipper had finished, then muttered hoarsely:

"Thanks, skipper. I wouldn't have done this much for you. But I'm done for. Can't put a tourniquet round my neck, you know." He laughed bitterly. "If you'd done that a while ago, and slipped the rope over a tree limb, this wouldn't have happened."

The skipper sent his men back to the open with the other three captives, for his ideas of treating even enemies would not permit him longer to leave them in a situation which he had ordained for them in anger only to frighten them. Then he laid the stricken man down, trying to give him ease for the short space remaining to him.

"Here, take a swig of brandy," urged Beauchamp hastily. The man's condition got on the ruby one's nerves. "Beastly way to peg out, old horse. What the devil did you come here for?"

The man swallowed a great gulp of spirit, and something like an ashamed grin succeeded the spasm of strangling that followed the swallow.

"I'm not kickin' at the way I pass out," he gasped. "I can take my medicine when I back a loser. I guess I got a wrong idea of you chaps, anyhow. Thought you were a pair o' tough sports in somebody else's preserves. But a fellow does queer things for money, an' booze, an' women." He strangled painfully. "Ask that squash-nosed guide o' yours," he choked, and rolled over in a spasm of agony from which he never recovered.

"Wonder what he meant," mused Beauchamp later, when he and the skipper again stood on the bank of the stream, wondering what had happened to Tomking and the procession of strangers.

"Find out soon, I expect," growled

Saunders. "I wish he'd told us how many more snakes there are, though, before he cashed in his chips. Got two, didn't we?"

"Three in all, counting the one that killed our Malay. Ugh! The shivery brutes!"

The prolonged waiting, on the verge of expectancy, began to affect the nerves of Beauchamp when dusk fell and yet Tomking did not appear.

"I vote we have supper, Saunders," Ruby suggested, when he had twice experienced a strange chill running down his spine. He had also detected more than a passing uneasiness in the face of Bubbles, who, trying hard to emulate the quiet poise of Jess, was nevertheless coming under the spell of the suspense-haunted atmosphere. Saunders himself seemed to jump slightly at hearing Ruby's voice.

"I second that," he agreed, and left the river bank after a last keen scrutiny of the little ravine out of which the main stream trickled. "We'll go ahead as if there was no shadow of interruption, Beauchamp. The Battaks never sleep, so we'll have them posted one on this side and the other at the rear; then all hands can turn in as usual. And if Tomking doesn't show up by the time we've finished supper, I'll take one of them along with me and see just what is going on up there in the hills."

There was a forced effort at supper on all sides to appear at ease; and outwardly it was successful to the extent of imbuing the Malays with confidence; but many a carefully veiled glance of question passed from Jess to Saunders, to be as carefully avoided.

The skipper lounged on the edge of the platform which had been built as a protection against the snakes, his cigar burning steadily, his alert face turned toward the hills.

"If yer inside you can't be outside by a damn sight,  
Haw, haw, haw!" \*

The interruption came in a clear, piercing peal from across the river-bed, and Saunders leaped to his feet.

"That's Tomking!" he declared with vast relief.

### CHAPTER XIX.

THE last note of the doggerel had scarcely ceased when it was answered from the camp by Bang and Kohl uttering together the yell by which Tomking had summoned them once before on the river march. Like an echo the yell was answered in turn, and the two Battaks slipped like ghosts through the darkness and stood under the platform edge.

"Tomking he wanna spik yo', sar," grunted Bang.

Saunders leaped to the ground, disdaining the ladder, and into the vague radiance of the dying fire stepped Tomking with a stranger in uniform, armed.

"This is a brother o' mine, cap'n," Tomking announced briefly, and proceeded without apparently caring how Saunders accepted the announcement.

"Joe, here, is one o' the gang along with that woman. He's harmless, though. Sentry, that's his job, and he's takin' a rest. Found him by accident. That don't matter, though. This is the news, cap'n: D'you remember how that first gang o' men acted when you kicked their ganger over the line first day up here?"

Saunders nodded.

"Well," Tomking went on, "they're sore with their job. They want to come in with you. They were told a lot o' lies. They ain't bad chaps, most of 'em, though, if you take 'em, you'll have to watch one or two o' 'em. I can do that."

The skipper tried to get a clear view of Tomking's suddenly discovered brother. The cool introduction into the camp of an armed member of the enemy's party, followed by the bald

statement of relationship, and in turn succeeded by such a proposal as taking into his bosom the crowd who had first initiated hostilities, was food for thought of the deepest. Tomking sensed the skipper's suspicions, and abruptly stepped close in and thrust his expressively ugly face into Red's.

"Look here, cap'n, have I served the outfit well or badly?"

"Well," answered Saunders, unhesitatingly.

"All right. Don't begin to doubt me now." A note of passion crept into the man's voice. "Here, take a look at us together."

Saunders was forced to grin as the flickering light of the lantern in the hut revealed those two faces side by side. It had appeared unlikely that there could be two such faces; yet here they were, beautifully ugly, frank, fearless, almost embarrassingly direct of gaze.

"Beauchamp!" the skipper called. Ruby dropped down beside the group. "Meet Tomking's brother, Ruby."

For a second or two Beauchamp stared at the brothers; then he laughed, and, with Saunders joining in, Tomking and his brother were accepted at pretty much their own valuation.

"And you found him by accident?" the skipper doubted, with a smile, which was reflected in an instant in both the brothers' faces.

"Well, we would have met, I suppose, some time or other. But it was an accident to-day," grinned Tomking. "How about bringin' them men in, though? They're just over the river. Then there's another thing to talk about when that's settled."

"H'm! How about this, Ruby?" the skipper hesitated. He briefly told Beauchamp of Tomking's suggestion.

"What can we do with the blighters?" queried Ruby. "Won't it mean keeping watch everlastingly on them?"

"Tomking undertakes that duty, though he says they're all right. We

can use them, easily. Send 'em along with old Tod Carter and have 'em build a real dam down river; then we can use our boats up here and double our strength, besides having some means of transport other than humping packs over the mountains."

"Let's interview the bally deserters first," suggested Ruby. He started toward the river, when Tomking stopped him.

"I'll fetch their spokesman over," he said. "Don't you gents cross over yet a while. Dutch Zim's over there, farther up, holding a confab with another branch of the rotten tree. I'll tell you presently."

In ten minutes Tomking returned in company with two men who bore between them a big cane basket. This they kept firm hold of while Saunders examined them. Apparently they were genuinely anxious to quit their present employers; their answers, as regards reasons and intentions, satisfied Beauchamp and the skipper, and after a moment's consideration Saunders remarked:

"All right, men. Bring your gang over and make camp behind us. You'll have to go short on rations until we can send down to the forks for more. Some of your noble pals set fire to half a ton o' grub back at the south end."

"We've got rations, sir," replied the spokesman civilly. "Each man in the gang will bring his own. And if we're coming in with you we might as well leave this basket. You can use what's in it I expect."

"What is it?"

"Mongoosees. We pinched it from the new crowd just arrived. They brought three baskets of cobras to drive you out, and a basket of mongoosees to choke off the snakes when they took possession after you. We left 'em the snakes. They're having a noisy argument with Mister Dutch Zimmerman just now about who's boss over them."

Tomking and his brother conducted the immigration of the new recruits, and set a guard over their camp, unknown to them, to keep them secure until they could be more thoroughly inspected in daylight. Then the basket of small snake-killers was put in charge of a Malay who understood the little beasts, and Tomking requested the skipper and Beauchamp to listen to his further communications before his brother started back to his own camp.

"Fire away," said the skipper.

Tomking held silence for a moment, peering up into the darkness of the trees, then he gulped dryly and spoke.

"First of all, gents, let's get straight on my motives in joining up with you. Dutch Zim, I told you, didn't I? And that's right, too, so far as it goes; but there's more. Joe, here, is boss watchman of that woman's personal gang, and keeps good guard too. Tell you why. That Jezebel was my wife!"

A little cry fluttered out on the darkness from Bubbles and Jess on the platform above, and Tomking glanced up in doubt.

"Go on," Saunders told him, quietly.

"Yes, sir! My wife," repeated Tomking. "Now you know why I want her to draw payment in full. The poor dupe who's with her now, a major of the royal army, is going crooked at her beguilement, just as that other poor young fool did up in Achin. But it was Dutch Zim who first took her from me; it was Zim who sold me to the Achinese cannibals, leaving me crucified to two trees up in their wild country so that he might carry away both my wife and my gold. That little trick failed, so far as killing me goes, by sheer accident. I managed to get on the right side of old Bang's father, and lived.

"But for the present you may know that Joe is in the confidence of that woman because she knows he's my brother, believes he's madly in love with her, and she believes, and thinks he be-



lieves, me dead. She's promised him everything a man can wish for in earth or heaven; and he knows her for what she is.

"Dutch Zim has deserted her, too, mad at her fickleness and greed. Now he and Dan Mallet are trying to seduce the Hindus and their leaders from her service. If they can do that, those cobras intended for you will be turned adrift up the ravine where her own camp and followers lie." Tomking stopped and grinned up at his taciturn brother. "Shouldn't wonder if they have some fun pretty soon whichever way they come to terms. The chaps who pinched the mongooses marked one of the snake baskets like the mongoose basket before they left."

Beauchamp and Saunders sat a while in silence when Tomking ceased; and on the high platform the girls could be heard conversing in whispers. Presently Ruby wanted to know:

"Accepting all this, Tomking, just how does it really affect us? What do you want us to do?"

"Only this, gents. Carry on your own business as if there wasn't a crook this side o' Sing Sing or Newgate. Leave Joe and me to our own affairs, and don't interfere when the showdown comes, if it comes in your presence. You'll have trouble, as you expect; and I'm your man; but I want the woman, and Joe wants Dutch Zim."

"But what on earth is all this battle murder and sudden death about?" burst out Beauchamp irritably. "Why does an army corps of crooks swoop down upon us as soon as we land on our lawful domain?"

"You've picked out a plum, sir, that's why," returned Joe. "That Kempees & Van Zoom outfit knows it, and they started in to queer you."

"Yes, we know all that stuff," interrupted Saunders impatiently. "But Kempees, Van Zoom, Dutch Zim, and a gang like them couldn't outfit a

crooked army on such a scale as this. Why, man alive! even the fat chink down at that stinking village at Pulo Lawan tried to stop us. Our river dam was cut twice, our guards killed, and our stores up north end burned the moment they were left unguarded. We were attacked in force, three of our men killed, then these cobras! D'you mean to tell me Dutch Zim has brains or power enough to carry on that way?"

"Not they, captain," Joe replied. "My brother has told you something of the cleverness of this woman, even before he revealed her identity or his own. Dutch Zim and his sharp lawyers could manage to drive the ordinary concessionaire away with a cooked-up yarn of faulty titles; but this thing is bigger than you imagine. That fat old Chinaman at Pulo Lawan has been all over this territory; he reported it simply saturated with petroleum through the entire middle; there is gold, as you have discovered; the rubber you can gather in a month will load down a score of mules at the first shipping.

"You're up against something bitter—and that's this woman—Rubens, she calls herself—and the man who's dancing at the music of Missus Bathsheba just now was a gentleman not long ago. He's selling his immortal soul, *plus* the name of a gentleman—which in real life is worth far more—for this woman's tinsel favors, and he'll wade through hell now, eat brimstone, and act like no devil could ever act, rather than acknowledge failure."

"And what of Zim and his partner?" inquired Ruby.

"They'll put up a fight, and a hard one, because they have on their side those shyster lawyers. But make no mistake; both of those gangs will join hands before they let Mr. Beauchamp here get away with his bargain."

"And your object is—what?" Saunders put in. "Simply revenge?"

"Not revenge alone, captain," Tomking interjected hastily. "That's for savages and small-time crooks. Allowing that I'd gladly tie Zim to a tree and let the maggots dig subways through him, that's only justice, ain't it? As for the woman, hasn't a husband a right to spank a naughty wife?"

The man's tone, although his words were commonplace, sent a rippling shiver through his audience. The girls above uttered a little gasping cry in chorus.

"No, it's not revenge only," Tomking concluded. "That is a motive which stops at the consummation of a definite act. I have a motive which goes so far beyond that, that after I am through there ought to be no more land-sharking in Sumatra, no more seduced wives, no more seduced officers who were once gentlemen, and if the luck holds good, no more decent men turned into savages as I have been!"

## CHAPTER XX.

A TRANQUIL night was succeeded by an uneventful morning. Tomking's brother had returned to his post; Tod Carter had taken his new recruits, after a keen inspection of them, on a long march down river to start building a dam; no sign came from the lurking antagonist in the hills, and a mongoose had already killed a cobra.

In the stream bed, overfull from the rains of the night, a party of Malays serenely washed gravel and sand under the smiling overseership of a lean, hawk-eyed islander. Malay women had already settled down in their new quarters as if no alarm had ever been sounded; Jess and Bubbles passed from mother to mother giving simple physics to combat infantile colics and mulligrubs.

"We might as well get busy preparing for boring on that western oil

ground," suggested Saunders, scanning the peaceful camp.

"Think it's safe to leave the outfit?" Beauchamp asked, with a sidewise glance at the perfectly unconcerned girls. So lightly did the situation impress them that Bubbles had treated him that morning to another exhibition of her wayward moods, and he had, in revenge, turned to Jess for comradeship. He was still chuckling over the result. He could still see the blank surprise on the faces of Bubbles and Red Saunders when Jess merrily met his advances in utter sympathy.

"Safer than ever," Saunders laughed, noticing his friend's glance. "Besides, I want to talk to you on private affairs, and I can't do that here. Let's take a look over the ground ourselves."

They were about to start, accompanied by one islander, when a whistle from the hillside guard, Kohl, halted them. Through the night no sound had come from either party, Dutch Zim's or the woman's; now it was Dutch Zim in person, with Dan Mallet, who appeared.

"Bosh! Pipe the pair o' toughs trying to look tender!" chuckled the skipper. He stood his rifle against the post of the platform, and advised Ruby to do likewise. The two men approaching from the foothills appeared unarmed; their faces, with grotesque results, wore expressions of conciliation. Dan Mallet, tough as an oak knot, had the appearance of a gargoyle caught in a smile; Zim, smooth, greasy, blatant, looked exactly what he was—a dressed hog posing as a human being, with all the human unpleasantness and none of the piggy virtues.

"What shall we do with the blighters?" Ruby wanted to know.

"Nothing, so long as they behave. If they prove sassy, though, leave 'em to me, please."

Zim halted twenty yards away and hailed the camp.

"Hey, cap'n, we want to have a talk."

"Nobody's preventing you," retorted Saunders.

"I know it. But, say, won't yuh tell yer wild man here to leave us come through?"

Kohl stood like a wooden image not five yards away from Dan Mallet, who had been too slow to prevent him slipping around to the farther side. The little savage possessed no weapon save his murderous knife; that blade which lopped heads as easily as twigs; and his expression was only mildly ferocious. In fact, he wore a jagged-toothed smile.

"Oh, come ahead," Beauchamp smiled encouragingly. "Kohl won't eat you—at least, not until we give the word."

Zim and his companion sidled forward ludicrously, and stopped at the posts of the hut. Their faces lighted up a little at sight of the women and the girls, as if the feminine presence gave proof of peace. Perhaps their experience in life lacked in some vital particular; anyway, they really seemed to believe that.

"What d'ye want?" snapped Saunders, giving them no welcome.

"Aw, cap'n, yuh needn't be so rough," smiled Dutch Zim ingratiatingly. "Dan's a good skate, and don't hold no grudge against yuh. I don't neither. Let's get together an' see what we kin do against this bunch up yonder. They want yer land, Mister Beauchamp," he announced, hurriedly turning to Ruby in hope of seeing in his face that hope which was denied him in Saunders.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ruby, fixing his monocled stare on the greasy Dutchman. "D'you know, I've fancied something of the kind for a long time. Have you two chaps, by any chance, joined the Salvation Army?" he drawled.

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Dan Mallet looked blankly at his quizzer, while Dutch Zim tried hard to hold the half smile of greasy conciliation he had brought with him. Saunders grinned happily, satisfied now that Ruby Beauchamp was proving himself worthy of his comradeship.

"I dunno whatcher talkin' about, mister, but I ain't no man's fool, if that's the tune o' yer song. Don't get gay, boy." Mallet snarled the words with hard breathing through his nose. Dutch Zim stuck an elbow into his mate's ribs viciously, warning him to silence. It may be that Mallet was still sore at loosing that boxing championship, and was still sorer now that he saw for the first time his should-have-been opponent, wearing a monocle. Saunders laughed aloud, and a shade of doubt flitted across Mallet's hard face; but he appeared to hold none of the respect for Beauchamp that he had acquired for his late skipper, and flung off Zim's restraining hand.

"Say, what's the joke?" he demanded, belligerently. "Shut up, yuh fat swab!" he snapped, in answer to Zim's frantic appeal for caution. "What's all that guff mean, mister?" he persisted, facing Beauchamp with blazing eyes and clenched hands.

Ruby smiled in utter happiness. His monocle dropped from his eye and was flicked back over his shoulder to swing by the ribbon. He took a leisurely step toward the raging sailor, and like a clamp of iron Saunders' hand fell on his arm.

"I said leave 'em to me," the skipper reminded him simply, and said no more until, having taken Mallet by the ears with both hands, thrust him backward five paces, pounded the back of his hard head into Dutch Zim's scowling face, and added the impetus of his good right foot, he uttered a parting admonition:

"Talk quietly and straight if you want to talk to me, you pair of Willies.

And don't come here busting up the peace and order of our camp, or I'll set a mongoose on to you. Scat now!"

There was one moment when Zim looked humble and pleading; but his desire to enlist on what seemed to promise to be the winning side was not strong enough to counteract his ingrained currishness; he shook a fist backward, fiercely striving to cast off Mallet's urging hand.

"I spoke yuh fair, Saunders! I spoke yuh fair, yuh red sweep! I was willin' to chip in along with yuh and help euchre them crooks back there. Now yer can go to 'ell, the pair o' yuh and yer wimmen. Yer time's short, bullies. Watch Dutch Zim!"

"Watch me, too!" bawled Mallet, savagely, inoculated with the virus of Zim's rage. Beauchamp started forward, aching to put just one balled fist into each of those blatting mouths. Red Saunders stopped him with a significant grin as Kohl uttered a weird, piercing yell, making his knife flash and sing through the sunlit air. Like an echo to the yell came another, more piercing still, and out of the jungle leaped Tomking, naked and unarmed, to creep with pantherish swiftness and cunning movement after the retreating outcasts.

Dutch Zim stood like a stricken ox for ten seconds, his arm fast held in Mallet's right hand, his free hand raised in threat. Then his shining, bestial face paled, seemed frozen in terror, and his flabby lips parted in a voiceless howl. Like a scared rabbit he turned and leaped for the hills, careless of what happened to Mallet, mouthing foolishly as he went. Dan Mallet paused for five seconds longer, then the frenzy seized him too; silently, but as rapidly as Dutch Zim went, he left the camp and headed for cover.

"That'll do, Tomking!" called Saunders. Tomking came back with disappointment written boldly on his ugly

face. The expression cleared in a moment.

"You're right, cap'n," he said, unsmilingly. "The time's hardly ripe yet. Joe must be in on this."

Tomking stepped back to his abandoned task in the jungle, and Saunders picked up his rifle.

"Come on, old chap," he suggested, "let's take that walk."

Beauchamp followed him, and together they strode through the tangled bush for some distance, until they reached a stretch of open land which simply reeked of petroleum, where verdure died. But before they had a chance to begin their examination of it, up from the camp pealed a scream—a native woman's scream—followed by a chorused yell, and a rifle shot.

## CHAPTER XXI.

"TALK to you later!" grunted the skipper, picking up his rifle and starting toward the camp.

"At your service," rejoined Ruby, following suit and plunging in pursuit of Red.

A scattering fusillade of gunshots burst forth, then the forest sank into a momentary silence, to awake immediately to the clamor of native voices and women's cries. At the edge of the camp clearing, just out of sight of the platformed hut, the two men butted into a little group of three Malays and a seaman, each regarding the other in dumb accusation which ceased to be dumb at sight of the skipper and his comrade. The sailor held in his hand a bunch of cut ropes, shaking them fiercely in the faces of the Malays.

"What's the fuss?" demanded Saunders, speaking directly to his seaman, who of all the others seemed least rattled.

"Pris'ner he got loose, sar," the man replied with a frown.

Saunders rapidly scrutinized the

faces of the Malays. They were as chagrined as the Gilbert Islanders. But the ropes had been cut, without doubt, and that hinted at a traitor in camp. Ruby Beauchamp stepped forward to assert his position as employer and demand explanations in terms not at all calculated to get results from scared men, when a distant feminine cry, shrill as a shriek yet not a shriek, but rather a ringing signal of distress uttered with definite purpose, came floating down through the still air accompanied by three pistol shots fired in swift succession.

"By Godfrey! that's a signal from the girls!" swore Saunders, and seizing Beauchamp by the arm he left his bewildered guards to their puzzle and dragged the ruby one into the open.

"Beauchamp," he snapped, "Jess never sends that emergency cry except in sore need! Look for Tomking, or anybody who seems to have retained his senses, and bring him here, quick!"

Saunders swarmed up the stout ladder to the hut, and saw in a single look that it was empty. The girls had been visiting the Malay women when he last saw them, and must surely have come back to the hut when finished, if only to replace the unused physic. In the little house there was no sign of either hurried departure or recent visitation. Jess' sweater, pistol, and sun hat lay on her bunk; the impedimenta of Bubbles was not there: but Saunders recalled, with a faint smile, that Bubbles, with her more recently acquired camp wisdom, always carried her effects along with her if only moving from hut to stream.

From the platform the skipper examined the vast expanse of stony level, hillside, and sweeping jungle through his binoculars, and the world lay bare and secretive. With a single leap he regained the ground just as Beauchamp emerged from the riverside thicket bringing with him a scowling seaman

who appeared more than loth to leave the river.

"Whaffor Missy Beecham no let me stay along?" the man cried, catching sight of his skipper. "Pletty soon can catch bad fella!"

"Come here and tell me quickly what's happened," commanded Saunders sharply. "Where are the lady missies?"

The islander gained coolness in the presence of his well-loved skipper.

"I telling you," he said, "dam bad fella lib along dere." He pointed over the stream and toward the hills. "Pris'ner he run; me run too—all fella run—catch look see at ribber, den plenty shootin', an'"—the man shrugged his broad shoulders helplessly—"we come back—no can see fella what run away, and missies gone!"

"Who was shooting?" demanded the skipper sharply. "Not the runaways?"

"No, sar. Dem shots come from de jungle first, den from de hills, den from ober dere," pointing to the rugged hills to the southward. Saunders tried to think it out. Ruby burst in with:

"By Jove, Saunders! it must be those chaps who set fire to our stores back yonder."

"No doubt of it," rejoined the skipper, and there was a metallic note in his voice, his keen eyes twinkled in the birth of that smile which meant ill for his enemies. "And I deserve this, Ruby, for leaving the camp without a real guard. Old Tod Carter would never have let us down like this. Where's Tomking and his cannibals?" he snapped, his fingers busily filling a spare cartridge clip for his pistol.

"I no see dem fella, sar," replied the islander dolefully. The skipper started toward the hills with a whiplike, back-flung order:

"Get all the *Black Pearls* and trail after us. Tell the Malays to look after themselves. Come on, Beauchamp!"

As they took the stony rise on the

dead run he grunted in answer to Ruby's half-hearted objection:

"I'm as careful as you can be of the safety of folks working for me, but Jess stands first."

"By Jove!" blurted out Ruby, striding along beside Red. "I believe you are the best chap in the world. For an adopted daughter you certainly show extreme regard. I respect you more and more, old top."

Saunders almost stopped in his tracks. He stared hard at the ruby one as they ran, then a laugh of real amusement roared forth.

"Oh, you thick loon!" he guffawed, and gave no heed to the flashing anger of his comrade.

Tomking's brother, the previous day, had explained so accurately the situation of Mrs. Rubens' camp that Saunders went straight toward it. It never occurred to him to doubt for one minute that the ravages of his own camp had erupted thence, and that the girls would be found there, if at all. Just one thing bothered him, however, and that was the absence of Tomking and his two comrades at such a time.

Wishing with all his heart, though hopelessly, that he had kept grim and tried old Tod Carter with him instead of sending him down the river, the angry skipper plunged forward through a wild and dismal crack in the hills, selecting and keeping a trail with as much certainty as if the girls had left visible instructions. Beauchamp labored along close to his shoulder.

Night overtook them while yet in the defile, for, as the dusk crept down the valley, the skipper began to feel doubts regarding his direction. As the minutes passed, and the ground rose, with still no trace of the recent passage of the girls, doubts were intensified.

They halted at last at the foot of a cliff which soared like a wall at their backs, and here they flung themselves down on a slab of mossy rock and en-

deavored to allay hunger with tobacco. The fragrant smoke filled the silent evening like incense.

"Jove! It's as dead and silent and empty as an old tomb," shuddered Beauchamp after five minutes of hushed smoking.

"Getting on your nerves?" laughed Saunders, quietly. "I thought the place was full of small sounds. Listen to that!"

A soft, pattering as of tiny feet came from overhead. A pebble fell at their feet between them, then another deep and awful silence. Ruby stared up at the frowning rock wall, seeing nothing. Then came more soft pattering, a sudden slipping of a heavy body on a smooth incline, and with a swift note of warning to Ruby, Saunders sprang to his feet, gun in hand, and leaped away from the wall. Beauchamp, a fraction slower, felt the weight of a world descend upon his head and shoulders; the skipper, hurled yards away by a similar impact, recovered partially in the smothering grip of three catlike figures who handled themselves like fighters, and possessed a degree of strength which forced upon the powerful seaman the conviction that he was up against a serious dilemma.

"This way, Beauchamp!" he roared, and applied himself grimly to his assailants.

## CHAPTER XXII.

RUBY BEAUCHAMP heard that shout, and laughed. For all his ability to obey the injunction, he might as well have been in Java; for out of the darkness dropped silent figures that seemed possessed of wire sinews, steam-driven hands, and the resistance of gorillas. His rifle, hastily snatched up, was twisted out of his hands as one might twist a stick from a willful child; his own determined forward movement was barred with the immovability of a masonry wall; his fighting fists, cap-

able fists too, were brushed aside and their blows returned out of the darkness by men who knew almost as much as he knew of hand fighting—and there were three against him at first, with more dropping apparently out of the sky.

High up the cliff wall a light shone out, and the effect was not only weird, but conclusive proof of the keen cunning of the leader of the band that had assailed Saunders and his companion. Like a shaft of purest sunshine the light came down; it flickered for barely a second, then rested, first on the red head of Saunders, battling like a Greek of Thermopylæ, then on the vermilion poll of Beauchamp, fighting as manfully, but with far less experience in the tricks and methods of rough-and-tumble.

From one to the other of those two flaming heads the light beam wavered: otherwise it was steady as the rock from which it flashed: and with eyes blinded by the brilliance, against foes who fought determinedly and well, with the advantage of eyes free from that appalling blaze, Beauchamp felt himself going down under numbing blows, and with his last conscious breath he flung out a panting roar:

"Saunders, cut and run! I'm done! Save yourself for the girls——"

The skipper heard, and grinned through battered lips. Now it was he who could neither cut and run nor help his comrade. Beauchamp's assailants, released by the ruby one's collapse, piled in like a living avalanche, and now there were uncounted opponents for Red to fight. In the sudden onset of the new foes he went to his knees, and the weight of three men bore down on his broad back. Like a powder charge under a rock he upheaved them, and for a brief breathing space stood free of enwrapping arms. Then from the vicinity of the searching light pealed a hoarse, savage voice:

"Stand clear!" The command was followed by a shot, and Red Saunders stumbled and sank to the ground, while a sharp, authoritative voice, also near the light, called down curses on the shooter and threatened him with shivery penalties.

"Aw, shut up!" retorted the bestial tones of Dutch Zim. "D'ye think I want that guy to bust loose? I done what all yer swell toughs haven't been able to do, ain't I?"

A glancing bullet which peeled a furrow of red hair from his tough skull had laid Red Saunders out. To all appearances, in the glare of that searching light, he was out and done for, so grotesquely did the combination of smeared blood and flaming hair frame his dark face. Beauchamp seemed to be in little better case, although no shot had reached him; but it was he who first opened his eyes and fell into wonderment at his situation.

An intolerable feeling that his spine was being broken in two speedily forced Ruby to make an extreme effort to see just what was going on; and soon the monotonous thud under him, at times rhythmic, at other times stumbling, and the giddy swaying first head down then heels, told him that he was slung face upwards across the back of a small pony, his head on one side, his feet on the other. And his wrists, burning excruciatingly, he knew by the strain on them, and the corresponding thug on his heels were drawn under the beast's belly. He was as securely packed as a bundle of camp kit, and with about as much consideration for his feelings.

"Otherwise I'm all right," he grinned to himself, wondering what had happened to Red. For perhaps a mile he lay in torture, unable to catch a glimpse of any other being, human or brute; then, a little ahead, a commotion broke out which soon resulted in bringing him information.

Another pony, at first unseen, snorted

violently, and began to cut capers. Sounds as of an incipient stampede carried back on the faint breeze, and then the pony squealed, reared, and dashed madly back down the narrow trail, knocking men and Beauchamp's pony helter-skelter. Ruby felt himself toppling over without the least power of avoiding the fall or breaking it; and the next instant his knees and stomach were thrust against the cliff, while his pony's legs shot from under him and he came down awkwardly.

Amid yells and shouts, fear, anger, and bewilderment having their place in the hubbub, men ran to the fallen beast with lights; then, at a sharp order, the light was carried at a run after the runaway. Beauchamp's pony struggled violently for a short while, then subsided with a whinny of pain.

"Broken legs," surmised the unwilling Mazeppa. His own limbs and body throbbed and ached from the pony's frantic efforts to rise, which had ground and pounded the rider against the cliff. But now Ruby found himself more or less right side up, on his knees, with his head forced backwards agonizingly, and the weight of the panting beast across his legs. Down the defile the shouts of the men rang and echoed and dwindled away.

Soon a warm, heavy drop of rain splashed noisily upon Ruby's upturned face. An appreciable interval passed before another drop fell, but when it came it came in company, and, about the same time as a shot rang out down the trail, the rainstorm broke in an equatorial deluge.

In the first fury of the downpour the pony's struggles kept Beauchamp bobbing about; then the poor beast subsided again, to endure physical pain and probable drowning in dumb resignation; but the moment motion ceased, Ruby's ability to dodge the torrent went with it, and now the breath was driven out of him by the sheer force of the

water falling on nose and mouth. To add to his troubles, the lashings with which he was fastened began to tighten under the saturation.

All sound ceased along the gully except the roar and swish of water and ravaged cliffside jungle. Slowly, inevitably, the floor of the narrow ravine was covered with a rapidly running stream. A trickle first, then a brook, a rivulet, a river; and the water ran into the stricken pony's nostrils, into its mouth, driving the already frantic beast mad with terror.

Bits of bush debris began to swirl past, twigs, loose leaves, branches, then small bushes entire, with earth at the roots. The pony had ceased struggling; its legs were covered with matted flotsam. Beauchamp felt the waters about his own knees, and dully calculated how long it would take to reach his chin. Then the pony roused to make a last, dying protest against Fate, and toppled over the other way as it gasped its last breath away.

Dimly through the darkness, as his head was plunged under the water, Ruby caught sight of a lighter patch on the black wall of the night, sweeping past him on the flood in a shapeless mass. Then he was submerged, and the dead pony rolled over, legs out of water, and started to float down with the other debris of the appalling downpour.

Just as his soul seemed hammering at his lips for exit, a snag of rock or splintered timber hitched in his foot lashings, and held him, submerged still deeper, for what seemed eternity. Still he fought against the longing to open his mouth and invite death. His stubbornness met with the reward it deserved; for he felt a dull snapping sensation at his wrist, one hand came free, and his dead carrier rolled sluggishly over again, held against the current by the obstacle, but leaving the man's face clear of the water.



With lungs that felt as if stripped raw, he gulped in great drafts of new life, lying still as a mouse lest his uncertain craft turn turtle again. Then, with tenderest caution, he groped with his free hand for the obstacle that had proved sharp enough to sever at least one strand of his rope. His arm was free only from elbow to wrist, and his radius of action was limited. But in parting from his wrist, the rope left his right ankle less tightly bound, and his toes got a slight, very slight, leverage on earth, or something which at least felt like earth, more solid and supporting than the rushing waters.

With a free hand, and a foot not free but possessing a little sphere of movement, Ruby groped and sought for a means of release.

Presently his foot caught in some enwrapping impediment, and at the same moment his fingers fastened in a mass of cloth, or canvas. Tugging and kicking, tearing fingernails and all but breaking his tortured ankle, he slowly raised above water the ventilating cap of a tent, with cords and pole still attached. It was not at once that he knew what he had found; he kept right on working, and something like a cheer burst from his laboring throat when he dragged up above water the lower end of the tent pole, shod with a sharp, four-sided iron spike six inches long.

"Just as good as old Tomking's bally knife, by Jove!" he grinned, and went dourly to work on his lashings.

### CHAPTER XXIII.

THE cause of all Ruby Beauchamp's troubles was a wandering cobra. The fiendish mind that conceived the idea of driving Beauchamp and Saunders away by means of venomous snakes had overlooked two things: the uncertainty of any snake's voluntary movements; and the possibility of the carriers of the snakes becoming dissatisfied with their employers.

To the latter event Tomking contributed largely, though unobtrusively, and Dutch Zim had also helped, perhaps more largely, hoping to be one to profit by the change. The cobras had been turned loose in the ravine, instead of on Beauchamp's territory; and the squirming brutes had scattered.

One had crossed the gully in the darkness, no doubt seeking a snug lodging for the night, and the pony bearing Saunders, trussed up as Beauchamp was, stepped on the scaly tail. It was the lightninglike wrapping of snaky coils about his leg, and the deadly, poisonous fang stroke, that sent the little pony squealing back over the trail, the snake clinging tight and striking until flicked to ribbons by the mad gallop.

Saunders experienced a madder Mazeppa ride than ever Ruby suffered, for the maddened beast he was tied on kicked and swerved in the futile effort to fling off that clammy horror. And the poison, taking effect the faster as the blood leaped through the animal's veins to its furious gallop, gave to the motion a frenzied delirium which barely left the wounded skipper conscious. Then came the final stumble and fall; the running up of men; the swift, expert examination, and the merciful shot; and not until then did anybody deign to look at the human being lying helpless beneath the dead pony.

With the breath knocked out of him by that dying fall, Saunders lay quiet, panting deeply, his muscles tensed in the tremendous effort to refrain from groaning under the weight upon him. A light was flashed in his face, shining into his open, glassy eyes, and a curt, irritable voice gave an order:

"Cut him adrift! Some of you look for shelter; it's beginning to rain, and that means stop right here."

With every inch of his body a torture, the skipper permitted himself to

be dragged to his feet; then he waited for the next development, unarmed, weak, and dazed, but indomitable. As clarity returned, and his bodily discomforts diminished to the point where he could ignore them, his mind, which had never wavered from the problem of the girls' disappearance, was capable of pondering his own present problems as well. The men who had first captured him, transported him, and now released him, had left him on a low ledge of crumbling stone, and he could hear them above and around him, their voices calling to each other indicating a measure of apprehension and an eagerness for shelter.

And the rain came down as it had upon Ruby Beauchamp, in sheets, and flurries, and torrents. In the blackness the skipper groped about him in the desperate hope that he might drop his hand on some weapon perhaps laid aside while the owner joined in the search for high and dry shelter. He found nothing, and the voices had ceased. Like a flash of light the thought came to him that he had been left alone in his captors' anxiety. It was a moment's work to lower himself on the ledge until his foot swung clear. Try as he might, forward, back, and straight down, he could not touch one small hold which promised him a footing. He moved along the ledge, reaching upwards, with the same futility. But at knee height, by accident, he felt another narrower ledge, which seemed to extend without limit, and to this he climbed, holding his breath lest he overbalance and tumble into that lower blackness, the real depth of which he did not know.

Before he had straightened up to his full height, a cold blade of steel touched his throat like the cold finger of Death out of a well of infernal blackness. Involuntarily he choked back a gasp, and his hand flew up to catch the blade. The point was pressed, and he felt the

steel pierce the skin; a rusty warning came like the hissing of steam:

"Don't move! Stay where you are unless you want to be stuck like a *soor!*"

Without a sound in reply, swift as the stroke of a cobra, Saunders brought up his other hand, seized the naked blade at his throat, and wrenched it down. Almost with the same movement his free hand slipped along the weapon, along the bare arm beyond, and reached for the unseen throat of his adversary. His strong fingers closed around a throbbing windpipe, which was as swiftly released by the merit of thick oil on a tough skin covering a neck that felt like solid muscle.

Out of the darkness sneaked a long arm again, seeking for a hold on the skipper, and the two men, unseen to each other, hearing only the crunch of broken stone, the panting of each other's breath, and the swishing of the rain, came to grips on that ribbonlike foothold and fought silently.

"Whoever you are, you're a sport, anyhow!" panted Red, and with the compliment hurled himself forward blindly, gathered the man in his great arms, and threw him. The next moment, still without a cry, the pair were rolling over the ledge into the unknown depths. So suddenly that the surprise jarred more than the fall, they crashed into a dwarf pepper bush, through it, and out into a foot-deep pool of water. And the moment they landed, unhurt except for scratches, the skipper heard with utter amazement:

"You should have spoke before, cap'n! I nearly jabbed the steel into you."

"Tomking! Why, you ugly lummox, what are you doing here?"

Tomking caught Red's arm, dragged him a little way up the ravine, and led him to a high, round piece of rock.

"Never mind about lummoxes now," remarked Tomking. "Good for you the

lumnox wasn't Bang or Kohl. They'd ha' stuck first and warned afterwards. I heard yer voice just in time. That's good."

"But what were you doing up there on guard over me, unless——"

"Don't say it, cap'n," interrupted Tomking sharply. "I know how you feel, but I got feelings too, and reasons, remember. I wasn't guardin' you. And I wasn't exactly lookin' to find you there. I slipped the knife into your guard, if that's what the chap was; and I thought you were just another of 'em. No, I haven't done you dirt, cap'n. Don't ever think it again."

Impulsively the skipper gripped Tomking's hand, and a new sense of respect came with the grip. There had been moments when he had doubted the man and his two savage comrades; but in the future there could be no more doubts.

"Sorry, old chap, I apologize," murmured Red, awkwardly. "But what do you know? I wonder what's happened to Beauchamp?"

"Last I heard of him was that he was smashed under his pony. Thought you'd want to know about the young ladies."

"I do, man, I do! I want to know that every individual in the bunch is safe. But I know that Beauchamp ought to be near here, alive or dead. I need him, if alive."

"Can't tell you that, cap'n. I can tell you the ladies are safe, so far at least."

"Where?"

"That I don't know, since the rain started. They were carried off on ponies, and taken farther up this ravine to the main camp of the crooks. Anything may have happened to the camp, but nothing will harm the ladies, yet. They seemed to be popular right away with the younger men of the crowd."

"Come on!" snapped Saunders, slipping down from the rock into knee-

deep water. "We'll look for Beauchamp first. If he's alive, he'll be interested in what you've told me."

Their first steps brought the skipper and Tomking into sore trouble. From knee-deep the water grew to waist-high, and added to the difficulties of unstable footing and swift current was the increasing amount of wreckage hurtling down the ravine. Trees, dead things, masses of grass sward tangled into heavy rafts by the intricate roots, all hurled themselves against the two men as if discharged with deadly purpose by an implacable enemy. At one step the skipper lost his footing, and was carried away on the flood, grabbing Tomking's arm as he stumbled, and taking him along too. Both men recovered, but not until the roaring stream had carried them across to the other side of the ravine and planted them with a thump against something yielding, out of which issued strange sounds.

"By Jove! What a bally lark! I say, who the devil are you chaps, eh? You knocked the confounded wind out of me, y'know."

"Ruby!" roared Saunders, groping with both hands until he found Beauchamp's wet face, and, from that, his hand.

"Oh, it's you, eh?" returned Ruby, with a bored note. "I say, old chap, try and untie me, there's a good fellow. I've been sawin' away at these bally ropes for half an hour, and haven't cut one damned string. Confound this moisture, anyhow. It plays old gooseberry with things."

Before he ceased chattering, Tomking had deftly passed his keen knife through the lashings, and dead pony, tent, pole and ropes sailed away into the desolate shadows below. It required but a few sentences for Saunders to detect a slight note of extreme exhaustion, approaching hysteria, in Beauchamp's courageously assumed in-

difference. He spoke to Tomking, and together they hauled Ruby clear of the water and up on to dry ground. A swift search of his own clothes brought to light the skipper's flask, which, with his little medicine kit, seemed alone to have escaped his captors. As it happened, the brandy proved more useful than arms just at the moment, for it put life and new courage into three chilled, hungry, and apparently hopeless men.

"Rested?" inquired the skipper, after a while.

"Oh, quite," laughed Beauchamp. Tomking grunted assent.

"How high are we above the level of our camp, Tomking?" Saunders asked thoughtfully. He had been on the point of moving, but paused.

"About fifty feet, I s'pose. Anyway, before this is over, there won't be any camp left down there," replied Tomking with a grim chuckle. "May not be any camp left up here, where we're bound for, unless they've shifted it higher than they're likely to. This is the rain I've been expecting, but was afraid it was missing us this year. If Mister Carter has started his dam——" He broke off, laughing.

"Carter isn't a fool," retorted Red. "He won't start to build a water barrier on a rising river with his tools. I was thinking about the Malay women. How about them?"

"Wouldn't your seamen go back when they met this flood?" inquired Ruby, anxiously. The suggestion that those helpless Malay women and kiddies might be in deadly peril made him shiver.

"Hardly. And I'm not so sure the women would have the sense to get their food stores into the trees before too late. These are plains people, and not used to this sort of washout. Where are your Battaks, Tomking?" he suddenly asked, gripping the man in the darkness.

"Looking out. I can call 'em at any time, though."

"Then call one now. Send him down to help the Malays, and tell him to come back when the outfit is safe and stored against famine."

Tomking cupped his hands, and out across the roaring storm pealed the call his men knew. It pierced the elemental hubbub like a bugle call rings through a silence. Three times it was repeated; then came an answer, far away it seemed, up the gully. Ten minutes passed, then out of the gloom glided Kohl, announcing himself by name to Tomking. The little cannibal appeared quite able to see the others, for he went direct to his own master, ignoring the skipper and Ruby. His orders understood, he grunted once, it might have been either in satisfaction, chagrin, or indifference; then he pushed past and was gone.

"By Jove! What a lot of bally matting the chap carries round him," ejaculated Beauchamp. Saunders laughed, with a low curse of disgust behind the laugh.

"I felt 'em too," he said. "The little devil's been out head-opping again!"

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

A sudden lull in the downpour let the watery stars wink out, and Tomking led the way across the narrow gully. In the faint radiance of the stars, but slightly increased by a shamefaced moon, the scene lay bleak and dispiriting.

"Let's get over while we can," growled Saunders. They stepped across by means of heaps of debris, using dead and living alike, as necessity demanded, for stepping stones. And they were but midway up the steep ascent when the torrent broke again, in redoubled fury, hurled down and along on the breath of a terrific wind-squall which brought terrors which were absent be-

fore, and were now utterly unnecessary to render the picture terrifying.

"Can't stand against this, cap'n," gasped Tomking, turning his sturdy back to the appalling blast. The rain beat upon his bare back with the lash of whips; the skipper and Beauchamp, clothed in stout khaki, knew by the pitiless pelting on faces and hands what the man must be enduring. They had, Ruby particularly, followed Tomking's lead without question, unwilling to decline any hazard he was willing to take; and even Saunders, storm-hardened, and anxious as he was to prosecute their search, realized that it was more than human beings could battle against.

"You're right, I guess. D'ye know of any hole we can squeeze into?"

Tomking found one, a shallow, comparatively dry cave which chanced to open to leeward. Into this the three men squeezed, and tried to suck comfort out of wet pipes filled with saturated tobacco, which damp matches refused to light.

The rain fell on the just and the unjust, exactly in accordance with the ancient proverb; and the camp of Mrs. Rubens was in a bad way. When the first trickle of water ran down the ravine, the major, experienced in the country, insisted upon striking camp and moving to the high ground. Twice, before morning broke with every warning of a prolonged downpour, the camp was moved higher into the hills, until at last it seemed as if a safe site had been reached.

Apart from the effects of the storm, there was an air of unrest in the camp, and in the hissing gloom within the leaking tents much whispering was going on. Jess and Bubbles crouched close together in a corner of the big tent, watching with bright, eager eyes the major and Mrs. Rubens trying with every faculty to hear what was said.

"Now do you believe that I was right about Zim?" the woman was saying. "You ought to have grabbed him and shot his thick head off when he sneaked in on us."

"I'm not so sure, Sara," retorted the major; but his tone was not very decided. "You say Zim's scared by this Saunders chap. Anyhow, he's brought in a husky fellow in Mallet, and if they were scared they didn't show it greatly when they started off last night to bring in Saunders and his associate."

"He'll never survive meeting them!" cried Bubbles, angrily. Jess grasped her hand and whispered caution.

"Ah, you there?" laughed the major, swinging around with a start. "I had forgotten you ladies."

"You'll remember us as long as you live!" retorted Bubbles. "You don't expect that greasy pig Zim to capture Captain Saunders or Mr. Beauchamp, do you? He couldn't do it with an army! And if you don't know what the captain did to Mallet, you'd better ask your crooked sports from Palembang."

The major regarded Bubbles with amusement and admiration. The angry girl stood facing him, a very picture of righteous rage. Jess rose from her seat and stood beside her chum, just as brave as she, though less explosive by reason of greater experience. In Mrs. Rubens' eyes blazed a demon of jealous fury, for she saw the admiration in her major's face deepen and soften.

"Don't waste time and breath on the hussy!" she cried. "Here, outside there!" A sentry entered, sulkily, dripping wet and miserable. "Guard! take this girl in to Blum's tent!"

The man stepped outside, called a name or two, and came back with two companions who advanced unwillingly upon the furious girl.

"Better go, Bubbles. There's no chance for us in here, and you may be able to get hold of a pistol in there!"

Jess whispered hurriedly in her ear. Bubbles gave no sign of having heard. She fought desperately with the men, and loyally Jess flew to her side; but the men were too strong; they tore the girls apart, and Bubbles was rushed out into the roaring storm and across to the smaller tent occupied by Rivi and Corny and Blum.

Into this they pushed her, and she stood trembling in the semidarkness, listening to the thunder of rain on canvas, peering around ready to leap upon the owner of the tent and rend him.

Out of the gloom came a startled oath, then a chuckle of bestial gratification. A match was struck, and applied to a hanging lantern, for the interior of the tent was as a room at night instead of a canvas structure in broad day. And as her eyes penetrated the shadows, Bubbles saw the lounging form of Corny on a pile of blankets, and the upright, leering shape of Blum beside the tent-pole.

"She's mine, I saw her first!" cried Corny, springing to his feet.

"I poot a het on ju foorst!" growled Blum, savagely. "She vas mine, py Got!"

Suddenly all her nervous trembling ceased, and Bubbles felt a wave of cold determination surge over and through her. To be accepted by such men as a piece of cattle, as a chattel, perhaps, snatched her back from mad anger to sanity. She stood silently regarding the men, waiting and hoping for a chance to step near that tent-pole on which hung two pistol belts with open holsters.

"I'll play you euchre for her," offered Corny, smiling at the girl with what was supposed to be an expression of keen cunning.

"Takes too long, py Got!" objected Blum, leering at Bubbles fiendishly. "Take a penny. I toss oop."

"Loser gets right out o' here."

"Ja. Come, vot iss?" The coin spun upwards.

"Tails!" cried Corny.

The coin fell on the ground, and both men dived greedily forward to see the result.

"It's hets, py Got, und she's mine!" yelled Blum.

With the swift certainty of a jungle cat Bubbles sprang forward, thrust with all her might at the bending figure of Corny, and drove him violently against the groping shoulders of Blum. The men went to the floor in a swearing heap, and like a flash Bubbles snatched down a belt and seized a pistol. Covering them with the weapon, she slipped the belt about her neck, and took down the other one.

"Jess! Oh, Jess!" she screamed, and her voice carried through the storm like a trumpet call through the din of battle.

"Verdamt cat!" swore Blum, stumbling to his feet and making a clumsy dive to grapple the girl's knees.

Quick as light she fired, and made no mistake in her aim. The bullet took Blum squarely in the breast, and he pitched headlong, coughing, as Corny made his leap and Jess burst in through the tent flap, streaming with rain, her hair flying loose, but ready for action.

Bubbles fired again, and Corny stopped, looking foolish, gripping one arm with the other. In the momentary respite before the interruption she knew must come from outside as a result of those shots, Bubbles took off a belt, flung it to Jess, and took the leadership as naturally as if to the manner born.

"Come on, Jess," she cried. "We'll get out and find shelter somewhere until the rain stops. Then we'll go back to the camp."

Out into the pelting rain they ran, dimly aware that two astonished figures stood within the remnant of the big tent peering out. The peremptory tones of the major, and the shriller, more vindictive voice of the woman, hunted out across the wild spaces call-

ing their men, while the suddenly found voice of Corny added to the din and apprised the leaders of Blum's swift fate and the girl's daring escape.

"Which way?" gasped Bubbles, bewildered by the fierce thrashing of the teeming rain which snatched the breath from them both.

"If we can slip over the ravine edge," Jess screamed back, almost blinded, her long hair flying and wrapping its dripping coils about her face.

"Stop them!" yelled Corny, aroused to thoughts of vengeance. As if in answer came a shot from the tent, and a bullet exploded a cartridge in Jess' belt.

"Here, over, quick!" she panted, seizing Bubbles by the dress. Blindly they sat down on the edge of the chasm and commended themselves to a kindly Fate as they slid over. Beside and all about them poured the water. It had burrowed out a sluice in the softer earth, leaving two buttocks of rock which formed a narrow, roofless tunnel. Into this the girls cowered, each with a pistol held in readiness, and with sobbing breath waited for the attack they knew must come.

The sluicing water drenched them as they crouched; the slanting sheets of falling rain stung their faces like hail; and as if the very heavens were determined to bring about their downfall, a great boulder slipped and tumbled across their refuge under the force of undermining water as Corny stumbled to the edge, followed by half a dozen men, and began shooting into the narrow crevice with the merciless coldness of deliberate murder.

## CHAPTER XXV.

A FAST-FLYING cloud uncovered the sun for an instant, and the rain diminished until it was no more than a heavy shower. But the storm was not by any means over; the cloud passed, urged

forward by a heavier mass of scudding vapor, and from the frowning crest of Ophir rumbled the voice of thunder, to presently crack with a splitting volley overhead.

There had been no noticeable flash of lightning; that had spent itself beyond the cloud veil: but the terrific peal of thunder, coming as it did coincident with the recommencement of the teeming rain, surprised three separate bodies of men in as many different attitudes, and the most dazzling of lightning flashes could scarcely have rendered the tableaux more dramatic.

A cry had warned the men with Corny that something was happening, and they stood irresolute, after firing a single harmless volley into the girls' shelter. They stood on the brink of the chasm, streaming water, their faces showing the dislike they felt for the job they were called to. Farther along, beyond the camp, marched another band, a strange-appearing party who seemed possessed of some tremendous impulse which mocked at storms. And from the midst of this party arose two strenuously objecting voices: one cursing and threatening, with a man's vigor; the other pleading, threatening, reviling by turns, in the note of a cur.

Steadily the band marched, and halted at the main tent. Six stalwart Indian hillmen and three scowling white men in a sort of uniform hustled between them the protesting figures of Dutch Zim and Dan Mallet, to halt them before the threatening form of Sara. The major stood beside her, a frown deepening upon his stern face.

"Well?" The woman snapped the single word, her burning gaze fixed upon Zim.

"Aw, Sara, tell these guys to turn us loose," yelled Zim, and fear sat heavily upon him. "We done all——"

"You did nothing! Results—show results?"

Dan Mallet started to speak. A vivid

flash of lightning seemed to leap from the clouds within reach of their heads. In a second the crashing report of thunder deafened the ears; then, as swiftly as the lightning almost, the last heavy cloud passed over the sun, the rain ceased, and a hush fell on the earth.

And the first clear rays of still watery sunshine shone full on a pair of flaming redheads, creeping up over the edge of the ravine abreast of the camp and but fifty yards distant from where the girls crouched. Abreast of the redheads, creeping as swiftly, came a line of frizzy Gilbert Island heads, and flanking the line at one end was the grotesque visage of Tomking, now utterly natural, devoid of paint or chalk; at the other end the little monkey face of Bang, grinning as he cuddled the wicked blade of a knife which was streaked with stains not all due to rust.

"I tell yuh we got 'em—they're both croaked!" yelled Zim, frantically. "They're both down the ravine, dead as nutton, Saunders and the monocled guy."

As in answer came the terrific howl that burst from Corny's throat as Bang crawled over the top and stood fair in view. At the little man's waist swung four gory heads, and one, a ghastly thing of features frozen in a snarl of murderous hate, was the head of Rivi, Corny's chum.

And next after the horrid little fore-runner stepped the erect figures of Saunders and Beauchamp, backed at last by the crew of the *Black Pearl* who had doubled after them, and armed again with tools which put them on even terms with any two men living.

They were the dead men. Not a moment before they had been reported definitely out of the way. They appeared to give Zim the lie before the lying words were fairly out of his mouth. A shrill scream of fury pealed from the woman, and her pistol flashed

and crashed within a yard of Zim's head. But another eye had watched, and had forestalled her. Joe, Tomking's brother, wanted Zim for other purposes. He yelled as the woman fired, and her aim went wide. Before she could fire again, Joe leaped forward and flung Zim to the ground. And in the same breath another shape leaped into the circle and faced the woman. It was Tomking; and as they faced each other, the man and the woman, in an awful silence, the men around them, with all their divergent motives, their various impulses, their differing degrees of susceptibility, stood still perforce, awed to silence by the terrific sense of impending catastrophe which hung over them.

The face of the woman blanched, her great eyes glittered and stared into Tomking's eloquent face like the eyes of a bird before a hungry snake. Her breast heaved tremendously, and a quiver racked through her. Her full lips, no longer scarlet, or alluring, uttered one word:

"You!"

"Me!" the man uttered in response, and with a hand as remorseless as a steel claw he reached out, seized her wrist, and drew her toward him while a shriek of panic pealed from her throat.

Instantly the conflicting elements in the picture merged in terrific battle. Joe dragged Dutch Zim aside, clear of the rest, and Corny, rendered furious by the sight of his comrade's dead face, forgot the girls in the hollow and fired at Saunders. His men, seeing in the swift action of Joe the act of a traitor to their mistress, pelted him with shot, and advanced, firing steadily, upon the skipper and his crew.

The major leaped to Sara's side, and in his expression was that which showed he had caught the note of tragedy in the meeting with Tomking. As he reached her, Bang leaped behind



him, and sprang upon his back, knife ready. With a bound Saunders prevented the threatened stroke, for he wanted to talk to the major later. Tomking drew the woman inexorably after him, and the major, relieved of the immediate peril of Bang's steel, ran to her aid.

And across the swamped, steaming plain swayed a swiftly joined conflict. The mixed gang who had brought in Zim and Mallet seemed to hesitate; but Corny's men saw only the danger to themselves and flung themselves furiously upon the *Black Pearl's* grim crew.

Around the struggling woman the fight centered. The major, responding to her frenzied cries, strove to drag her away from Tomking, who as tenaciously persisted in his purpose. The skipper and Beauchamp, ignoring the general melee, keeping aloof in spite of the flying lead, sought for the girls whom they knew were there, but of whom there was no sign. Already there was a splitting up of combatants into separated knots, as if the men of the camp found small relish in their work. The islanders, like their skipper, appeared bent on search rather than slaughter, but fought stoutly so long as foes sprang up before them.

In addition, the holding aloof of the Hindus and their three white comrades was something to remark; and when Tomking finally dragged Sara to her feet at the very edge of the ravine, forcing her to face him, the fighting suddenly dropped into a lull in which every eye was turned toward the little scene being enacted. Only the major refused to be held by the grip of it. Loyal, however mistakenly, he was bent on saving Sara from what appeared inevitable Fate. Drawing his pistol now for the first time, he sprang forward again and presented the weapon at Tomking's head. Again Bang leaped to his back, beating the

pistol down, but too late to prevent the unforeseen result of the major's action.

Tomking, swinging Sara behind him, stepped back before the threat of the pistol shot; and the crumbling edge of the chasm broke under their weight; there was a swift outflinging of hands, a shriek and a plunge into the yawning pit. And before the clods of earth had ceased to fall, while yet men crowded at the brink to peer over in awed silence, into the thick of the crowd plunged Joe, dragging Dutch Zim after him like a sack of wool, his face set and grim as he glared in search of his brother.

Sounds, neither words nor cries, rather like the moaning of a beast stricken to death, issued from Joe's lips. The fat face of Zim was ashen and flabby—horrible. His eyes glared glassily. And with the strength of madness Joe picked him up, gripping him by the flesh of his neck, and bore him back until he overhung the broken edge of the precipice.

Upon the hush broke a cry, distant, muffled, and surprising. The skipper and Ruby, tuned as they were for such sounds, leaped toward the source of that cry joyously. And as they uttered their own yell of assurance to the girls whose voices they knew quite well, men turned in alarm to follow them with their eyes.

Then rose another chorused, tremendous yell which brought every man to the rightabout to stare at the near-by pony track issuing from the mountains onto the plain where sat the camp. Even Saunders stopped, and Ruby halted in his search for the owner of that muffled cry.

"Hi! Old Billy Runacres!" yelled the skipper, waving a hand and immediately plunging forward again in search of Jess. They had located the source of the cry, and presently found the boulder which prevented the girls' escape. But before they had time to

move it a new cry rang out, and again they turned to see.

There was no longer a struggle on the edge of the ravine. Every man who had been looking on now stood staring at the pony trail. The precipice brim was bare at last. Joe and Zim had finished their struggles. But in the front of the crowd, glaring at the pass, stood the major, pistol at his side.

With Runacres, who was grinning broadly and waving a roll of parchment or stout paper, rode a stout, red-faced military officer in the imperial Dutch uniform, whose bearing spoke of high authority. It was upon him that the major's staring eyes were fixed. For a moment the major stood, lips parted, face drawn in haggard shame; then, with the single exclamation, "Commandant!" he raised his pistol and sent a bullet into his own brain as the officer spurred his horse and galloped forward.

In another moment Runacres was stooping with Red and Ruby, lifting away the rock from the girls' prison.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

A HIGH noon sun blazed down upon a sodden earth, drawing the moisture up in shimmering steam and bringing flocks of chattering parrakeets and droves of monkeys from the recesses of the jungle to the whispering treetops of the open. A small body of native Netherlands troops, under the direction of the commandant who was speedily satisfied of the duplicity of the major, had herded together the scowling remnants of the small army of land pirates and they were already marching over the mountain trails toward Fort de Kock.

"Then that's all settled?" Runacres asked, when the officer gave back to him the papers he had been perusing.

"Everything seems correct, mynheer. Mr. Beauchamp's title should never

have been disputed, and I shall see that the Kempees & Van Zoom rascals are properly dealt with. It was necessary for me to send the body of that wretched suicide in to the fort, because the man betrayed his high commission, and his shame shall not be concealed by me; but as for the woman, well——"

The officer concluded with an eloquent wave of the hand. Then, with a formal salute he turned his pony's head and cantered away after his men. Leaving Jess and Bubbles at the camp, the men followed Beauchamp and the skipper down the declivity in search of Tomking.

"Here comes old Tod Carter at a dead run, Ruby. Wonder by what mysterious means he was persuaded that we might need him up here? He's late, anyhow, and he'll be mad as a hatter."

"He certainly looks as if he's marched for days without a halt," grinned Runacres, shading his eyes the better to distinguish the mate's party.

Carter was not yet within hail when a queer noise at the foot of the cliff brought the searchers down running. No living thing was to be seen; only a faint, and vanishing sound of rustling scrub gave evidence of some presence near.

"Here, Bang!" the skipper called, intending to send the little cannibal out scouting. No Bang replied; nobody appeared. The men began to scatter, tearing aside the bushes and parting the broad leaves of pandanus and banana; and soon a yell and a hurried exodus of a knot of scared islanders from the thicket brought Saunders and Ruby to the spot, half aware of what they were to see.

"Can we come down?" the girls called from above, eagerly scenting some vital discovery in the sudden activity below.

"No!" yelled Saunders, vehemently.

"Don't venture one step nearer here, Jess, for God's sake!"

At first sight it seemed as if the alarm was unnecessary. In the midst of a patch of trampled, soaked earth, lay the body of Joe, and upon his breast, partly covering his poor bruised head, was a great crimson banana flower. But Joe was dead. A few yards away they came upon the broken corpse of Tomking; and upon his breast too lay a great crimson flower.

"That's not accidental, surely," muttered Beauchamp, in a hushed voice.

"Quite certain it's not," rejoined the skipper; then, smothering a curse, he added with outflung hand: "neither is that!"

Huddled beneath a broken banana plant the bodies of Dutch Zim and Sara Rubens lay, and they were not laid out straight like the others. Here too were great crimson patches; but of far different sort. Here were no gorgeous banana flowers, laid there by reverent hands; but that which caused Saunders to abruptly drag his comrade away.

"Get busy, you fellows, and bury those things!" he ordered harshly. "Put Tomking and Joe together, decently. Cover up the others somehow. Ugh!"

Silently he and Ruby walked toward the narrow path down which Tod Carter was hurrying; and in a few minutes they were gripping the shaking hands of the old seaman.

"What are you going to do now?" inquired Billy Runacres over a hastily spread and sparsely furnished lunch cloth. He lightened the monotony of eating tinned beef by watching the expressions of his companions, particularly the faces of Bubbles and Ruby Beauchamp. From time to time a slow, shrewd smile wrinkled his eyes and lips. He nodded gravely when he intercepted a swift glance of dawning won-

der which Beauchamp flashed at the unconscious skipper and Jess, who were much closer together than usual. Betel Bob, the Fijian steward of the *Black Pearl*, hovered over the cloth in ludicrous apology for the poorness of the spread. No one noticed him, however, except Tod Carter, whose appetite was proof against any poorness in the food's quality so long as the quantity was right.

"There's only one thing to do," replied the skipper with a laugh. "Ruby's stores and equipment have suffered badly. There is plenty of water in the river now. You mean to carry on, don't you, Beauchamp?"

"Of course. We'd be fools to have gone through all this messy business to quit after all."

"Then I suggest we leave the balance of our gear up at our old camp, with the laborers in charge of a couple of my sailors. The Malays we'll take back to their village and pick 'em up again when we come back. We can make use of our boats now, Carter says, and that means we can get down to the schooner in a day or so. She can be raised in six hours, and when we come back there'll be no need to use any more tricks like that. You'd better carry the gold dust we've washed into Palembang, Ruby, and buy stores with it. You ought to take a decent fortune out of your land in a year."

"Perhaps," rejoined Beauchamp, thoughtfully. He glanced at the girls, and remarked: "Anyhow, old chap, we'll get down to work seriously now. And first of all let me say that it will be better if we leave the ladies behind next time."

Bubbles got up without a word, stuck her pretty nose into the air, and walked off, the picture of Lady Disdain. Jess watched her friend go, and smiled. Then she shook her head at Ruby and objected:

"Can't be done, my friend. You

can't separate me from my reckless lubby."

Ruby's monocle dropped with a clink. His mouth opened and snapped shut like a gasping fish.

"By Jove! Hubby, did you say?" Saunders laughed long and deeply. "I say, old chap, you led me to suppose Jess was your adopted——"

"Not so fast, Ruby," grinned the skipper. "That was your own leap at conclusions. As a matter o' fact, though we have preferred to keep our own secret, I adopted Jess as my wife a year ago."

"And you can't separate us, Ruby Beauchamp!" laughed Jess.

"Anyhow, good people, I won't bring Miss Muriel Vincent next time," Ruby asserted, and marched off toward the ravine path down which Bubbles had gone.

Ruby plunged through a cane brake and came upon Bubbles, sitting with her chin on her hand, gazing at the distant hoary crest of Ophir. She gave no sign that she was aware of his presence; and he, on his part, gave her back in kind. Without preamble he squatted down beside her, grinned in her face, and said sharply:

"Bubbles, we're going to start in a minute or two. Thought I'd ask you to come to my wedding. Comes off as soon as I can get a parson."

The girl stared at him, then her small, freckled nose rose in the air again and she stood up.

"I'm sure I'm not interested in your wedding, Mr. Beauchamp," she said. "As for attending it—I'd—rather—attend—your f-funeral!" Like a deer

she broke into a run and vanished, fumbling for her handkerchief. Ruby plunged after like a football tackle, and overtook her in a very few strides.

"Here, I say, Bubbles, don't blubber," he urged distractedly. "Can't you understand when a fellow's spoofin'? I say, now, don't you see, if you won't accept the invitation there can't be any bally weddin', y'know. Here, be a sport——"

Saunders and Billy Runacres were still grinning over Ruby's amazement when a softly smiling Jess raised a finger to force their attention. Ruby and Bubbles appeared, hand in hand, wearing a fine air of nonchalance.

"Ha? Changed your mind, eh, Ruby?" cried Jess. "You won't leave poor Muriel Vincent behind next trip, will you?"

"Indeed he will!" laughed Bubbles, impudently.

"Er—yes, dear old things," drawled Ruby, affecting indifference to the glances thrown at him. "I rather think this is no place for misses of any description. I shall bring Bubbles Beauchamp, though, and make no secret of the relationship," he concluded with an exaggerated bow toward Jess and Red.

"For that dig I shall insist on marrying you people on board my schooner the moment we get outside the river," the skipper smiled softly.

Old Tod Carter, hovering by for orders, stalked away in haste. He knew the signs. Growling deep in his throat, but with a whimsical smile in his keen eyes, he marshaled his men for the first leg of the journey down to where the real story of Bubbles and Ruby Beauchamp was to begin.





# The Comeback

by Edwin  
Hunt  
Hoover

Author of "Chains of Mind,"  
"His Patient Hand," etc.



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DUTCH AND BLUE FIND THEMSELVES IN THE MIDST OF FOOTBALL ACTIVITIES,  
AND THERE IS MUCH CARNAGE, SPICED WITH ROMANCE. . . . .

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ROMANCE is like a game o' football. Th' harder y'u charge, th' more stubborn is resistance. Another point in common is that they both incline to end up in a fight. Never havin' studied a rule book on either, I can't be certain whether a battle is prescribed in th' regulations or is just by personal agreement between th' contestin' parties.

Since th' time when "Blue" Danube an' me were th' storm centers, so t' speak, in both—an' all at th' same time—I can't observe a football game without wonderin' first: How many romantic complications are involved? Whenever I note a couple players square off for hostilities I think, "Maybe there's some girl on th' side lines that is th' cause for action, rather'n a difference of opinion about th' game itself." An' th' second wonder is: How do so many of 'em live to grow up? Persons that think cowboys live a rough life should consider th' football players before formin' any hasty conclusions.

It's said that experience comes

through hard knocks. While I don't begrudge myself th' former, Blue could 'a' saved me some of th' latter—which I could 'a' got along without just's well as not—by sharin' certain information with me. Not that I blame him, because I was holdin' out on him; an' we couldn't very well share confidences without one or th' other of us makin' th' first pass.

Blue an' me was lured from our home range one fall to investigate some new cow an' horse country that had been touted most favorable. Whilst proselytin', we made headquarters at th' Odaka Hotel in Agua Honda.

Th' town wasn't named that way because it was Mexican, but to sort o' tell th' truth as a warnin' to prospective land purchasers an', at th' same time, disguise its weakness with a Spanish name for th' benefit of real-estate men. It had "deep water" for fair. Th' town itself owned a well of unlimited flow at a depth of six hundred and eighty feet. Th' railroad comp'ny had built its roundhouse an' shops on th' strength of a

similar water supply; but all others had run out o' hope, money, an' patience before strikin' th' underground river. One persistent gent drilled a thousand feet. Then he saddled up his pony an' headed for th' Pecos River—sixty miles away—statin' that it was closer to water in that direction than where he'd been drillin', an' not so expensive.

Grass was fine an' high, showin' that th' country attracted its share o' rainfall. But what good is rollin' prairie without somethin' for livestock to drink? Wherefore Blue an' me, in our room on th' second floor of th' Odaka Hotel, decided to drift.

"As for me," Blue declares, "I don't know what I was thinkin' of to leave th' Rio Grande Valley. My broomies are makin' me money; I've got livin' springs back there in th' hills an' grass is good; but somehow I never rest easy till I investigate these reports o' somethin' better."

"I accept th' apology for havin' drug me up here with y'u," I told him magnanimous. "If I had any better lay than th' boskies for my cattle, I wouldn't know what t' do with it."

"I wish now," says Blue, gazin' out of th' window wistful, "that we could be back in Ringolade, or thereabouts, for Thanksgivin'. We could eat Brad Porter's turkey an' step out at his *baile* in th' evenin'. That new hardwood floor he's had put in is great for dancin'."

"Wish for somethin' reasonable," I advised him. "This bein' Sunday puts Thanksgivin' only three days off; an' it's two hundred an' fifty miles, horseback, to Ringolade—less we sell our ponies an' go by train."

"There ain't enough money in Agua Hondo to buy Scrapper," Blue settles that point.

"An' Salvador ain't for sale at any price," I agree with sentimental thoughts about my mount. "Why don't we stay here? There's goin' to be a

football game an' dance. We've got acquainted with some tolerable good friends hereabouts, which'll make it more endurable than spendin' th' day among strangers."

I'll remark in passin' that some Agua Hondo folks were more friendly with us before than after that particular Thanksgivin' Day. Also, if we could 'a' foreseen what would happen, we'd 'a' prob'ly left right then an' there.

Blue's hatchet face brightened. "Not so bad," he commends, fallin' in with th' idea immediate. "Which team shall we root for?"

Agua Hondo had been all het up over this football match. Frank Callan, a railroader, had organized a team from th' shops to compete with th' eleven Tim Best recruited in town. We didn't know such a heap about th' game, havin' seen it played only two or three times, so it was all th' more important that we choose a side to root for if we figured on gettin' any kick out of it.

"Why, I dunno," I worried. "Callan, th' mechanic, eats here. He's a good scout an' captain of th' Railroaders; an' Meador, th' bonus clerk who sits next to him at table—"

"An' then we have with us," Blue chirks up considerable, "little Timothy Best, who, besides operatin' th' Agua Hondo *Bugle*, is buildin' big loops at Violet, th' landlady's daughter. He's goin' to play at guard—wherever that is—for th' Citizens. Also there's 'Smilin' Dorgan, th' barkeep, whose two hundred pounds at center on th' same side ought t' be useful. 'Hard-rock' Jansen, th' village blacksmith, will be at tackle. They board here, too, an' we know 'em just's well as we do th' Railroaders."

That was as far as we got toward choosin' sides before supper, but it put me in a receptive state o' mind when Callan buttonholed me as I came downstairs ahead o' Blue, who had lingered to shave.

"Don't either you or your friend play football, cowboy?" he inquires, beamin' good-natured. Callan was a big, strap-pin' young chap with happy eyes an' a fightin' jaw.

"Why, no," I told him honest. "But Danielson"—I used Blue's correct name so's Callan'd know who I was talkin' about—"is a runnin' fool an' might do y'u some good if y'u're short-handed."

"Speed's what we want." Callan beckoned to a bunch o' shopmen who were gathered round th' office stove. "We're shy a half back an' one tackle. If he is fast, maybe he'll do behind the line. Can't we induce you to try out for the other position?" he urges.

"Not me," I refused. "I never went in for athletics. But you work on Danielson when he comes down. He'd make y'u a good hand. Besides bein' a foot racer, he could fight his way through a herd o' mountain lions an' deem it a pleasure. But don't tell him I sic-ed y'u onto him," I added when th' gang showed signs o' undue enthusiasm.

I slipped into th' dinin' room so's to be out o' sight when Blue appeared, figurin' on listenin' to some fun when he started to augur hisself out of a job playin' football. Blue is th' fastest runnin' human I've ever seen, but it gen'rally requires th' combined efforts o' all his friends to induce him to take his exercise other than horseback. So I didn't prophesy much luck for th' footballers.

Th' supper bell hadn't rung yet, so I was all alone till Violet Nascer, our landlady's daughter, come in with a tureen full o' soup. She dropped a few tears into th' soup an' her face was all screwed up into curves—so I judged she was cryin'.

"S'matter, Violet?" I ask sympathetic.

She put th' dish on th' table.

"Nothin'," she replies in a quaky voice an' without lookin' at me.

"Nothin'." She stamped out into th' kitchen.

I've noticed that when women are tearful it's good judgment to let 'em alone. Further, if any consolin' was necessary in this case, Tim Best, bein' her steady comp'ny, was th' elected party. I'd heard that she didn't get along with her pa—a lazy good-for-nothin' who let Violet an' her ma do all th' work involved in th' hotel lease—an' judged they'd fell out over some-thin'.

It wasn't but just a second or two till Violet's voice, like she was in distress, rose above th' sound o' rattlin' kettles an' pans; this was followed by th' girl herself, who come bulgin' through th' swingin' door with her old man hot on th' trail.

She charged in behind me, an' Nascer brought up short when I rose to my feet.

"Now, a outsider who interferes in fam'ly quarrels is most completely out o' luck; an' I never knowed it better than I did at that minute. But when a scared girl o' seventeen or eighteen, with sharp, red marks on her face where she's been slapped, comes to a man for protection, he doesn't hardly feel like lookin' on while she gets beat up.

"Y'ur wife wants y'u," I told Nascer without givin' ground, an' pointin' to Mrs. Nascer, who stood in th' doorway, pale an' tremblin'.

"Don't let him touch her," Mrs. Nascer begs, quiet, so's th' other boarders wouldn't hear.

I don't know just what I'd 'a' done if Nascer hadn't made th' first pass at hostilities by grabbin' th' front o' my shirt to shove me aside.

"Out of my way," he snarls, his un-combed hair standin' on end.

His layin' hands on me made it my battle, so I let drive one that wrecked his nose. No doubt it hurt—though I couldn't see how it was any alibi for him to quit cold an' start cryin':

"Now, Tildy, see what you went an' done. Called on a stranger to whip your own husband!"

I opined that Mrs. Nascor would tie into me immediate for abusin' her man—an' was gratified a heap when she told him:

"You pack your duds and go. I've stood for your abuse and laziness; but when you strike my daughter, you're through. Good-by and bad luck to you."

She was a frail, little woman, but she put a lot o' meanin' into her words an' didn't weaken when Nascor bolted to th' kitchen with both hands to his face an' blubberin' like an anxious calf.

"Thank you, sir," she embarrasses me by offerin' a hand in gratitude while Violet sobbed a whole lot. He's only Violet's stepfather—and a bad one at that. Her own father was a good man——"

"No doubt," says I, upsettin' a bowl o' oyster crackers in my nervousness. "Too bad he didn't live. Shall I call th' boys to supper?"

"Please do," Mrs. Nascor requests. "Violet," she put an arm around th' girl's shoulders tender, "I need you in the kitchen."

I couldn't help but feel squeamish over th' affair. No one that I'd ever heard of got away with dippin' into somebody else's fam'ly row, an' I didn't feel that I was about to set any new precedents. Also, I'd missed hearin' Blue alibi hisself out o' playin' football with th' Railroaders.

Before I give th' summons to chuck, I decided that I'd talk Blue into makin' a immediate departure, 'stead o' waitin' till after Thanksgivin'; but I was too late—an' all on account of its bein' my own fault!

Blue come in all surrounded by Railroaders who couldn't hardly leave his flanks long enough to let him through th' door to th' dinin' room—every one talkin' simultaneous.

His first remark, when he sat down beside me, was:

"Well, Dutch, I've promised to play football with these gents!"

"Eh? No!" I gasped.

"Yep," he tells me, all full o' self-satisfaction. "There's nothin' to it. Some one hands me th' ball an' I run down th' field with it."

"Oh!" says I, inhalin' my soup. "I thought it was more complicated. In th' games I've seen, th' man carryin' th' ball gets upset an' jumped on——"

"Sure," Brick, a whoppin' boiler-maker with curly hair an' red face, explains: "It's that way if a man's own teammates don't do their duty. Us fellers on th' line are supposed to flatten out th' opposition so the backs can run right on through."

"You'd better throw in with us, Dutch," Blue urges. "Play that tackle position an' help me out in case I get jackpotted."

He knowed, puttin' it personal that way, that I couldn't refuse. Besides, I was due to stay in Agua Hondo till after Thanksgivin' 'less I left without Blue, which I wouldn't 'a' considered. So th' Railroaders gained another recruit an' made me feel more at home when they all conceded that none of 'em had ever played football except Callan an' Meador.

Tim Best, sittin' at th' next table, smiled sour at all this talk an' winked wise at Dorgan. He smiled sourer'n ever when Violet, all flushed up an' cheerful, come in with th' meat course an' give me a lot o' unnecessary service while she had nothin' more'n a passin' "Good evening" for him. I enjoyed it some, at that. A pretty girl that eyes y'u with favor ain't to be greeted in a spirit o' mournin'; an' competition is th' spice o' life—so long as it ain't too serious or sentimental.

After supper, Meador, Callan, Brick, an' some other Railroaders come up to th' room with Blue an' me. We dis-



cussed football considerable an' framed a number o' scientific plays designed to flabbergast th' Citizens, an' separated about eleven o'clock, agreein' to meet on th' "gridiron," as they called it, th' next evenin' at four. Th' railroad give 'em a hour off each day for practice.

Blue pushed me out o' bed at a quarter to six in th' mornin'—it bein' my turn to feed our horses, which we kept in a rented barn.

Salvador an' Scrapper were used t' havin' their corn early an' we hadn't changed their habits durin' th' cross-country trip or while livin' in Agua Hondo. Neither of us minded gettin' up at that hour—bein' always astir by daylight when at home—but th' winter cold in a boom-town hotel chills th' marrow in a person's bones. Th' Odaka had been built more in th' interests o' speed than comfort. Th' owner was none too liberal with his lumber, an' the carpenters had prob'ly done th' best they could with th' material on hand, in consequence o' which it contained all th' disadvantages o' cold outdoors with none of th' pleasures of real fresh air.

A base burner in th' lobby downstairs furnished th' only heat. Nascer was supposed to start it, mornin's, an' I figured on helpin' with this chore in case he'd sure enough left in answer to his wife's request.

Th' stove was in operation when I got downstairs, an' a lamp was burnin' on th' desk.

I tiptoed down th' long, dark hallway so's not to wake th' guests that didn't get up till late, speculatin' on whether Nascer had made his peace with his fam'ly, or had Mrs. Nascer or Violet built th' fire—when a door flew open, sudden, just ahead o' me an' I was encumbered by clingin' arms, soft and feminine—Violet's! I couldn't see her with any degree o' distinctness, but I felt her presence heaps!

She kissed me on th' nose. Her aim wasn't so good; but her intentions was evident.

"You didn't give me a chance to thank you last night," she whispers.

It was a most thoughtful an' romantic occasion, afflictin' me with chills an' fever at one an' th' same time. I couldn't hardly make a report o' this to Gladys Belden—who I'd been chargin' with some regularity in Ringolade for th' past eighteen months; an' Tim Best, bein' Violet's beau, would be most annoyed about it. Still an' all—

"I thought y'u was savin' 'em for Tim," I told her in a voice that was affected some by nervousness an' some by a attempt to make it sound romantic an' tender.

"Don't you like for me to kiss you?" she asks, subdued, droppin' her arms into place.

"'Course," says I, not wantin' to hurt her feelin's. Also, bein' human, I ain't immune to osculation. In fact, it's enjoyable if not too severe or lastin'. "Do it often!"

She did!

I caught my breath just as it was leavin' me complete.

"Did y'ur stepdad leave?" I inquired solicitous.

"He's gone for keeps," she assures me. "That's why I'm so grateful to you!"

"An' what about Tim?"

"I gave him his walking papers last night. He acted ugly when I told him how nice you were—"

Footsteps on th' stairs warned me it was time to leave; but Violet didn't seem t' be particularly concerned—which made me all th' more nervous.

"See y'u later," I said, confidential, edgin' sidewise down th' hall, since I didn't know what else t' do.

I got to th' barn without no further mishaps an' took plenty time feedin' th' ponies so's to make sure th' dinin'

room was thickly populated when I went back to th' hotel for breakfast.

Th' report concernin' my run-in with Nascer had been spread an' th' Railroaders heckled me a lot about "rescuin' beauty in distress." No one seemed to feel th' loss of Nascer—who never had any popularity t' lose—but there was a prevailin' belief, which there was no bashfulness about expressin', that Violet an' me ought t' get married to celebrate th' occasion in a fittin' manner. Blue regarded me with suspicion, believin', doubtless, that I'd been slippin' over a secret romance without advisin' him of same.

If it hadn't been that I had in mind a certain incident that they didn't know about, I might 'a' kidded 'em back. But havin' this to worry over, all I could do was look sheepish an' grin, protestin' complete innocence.

When th' talk commenced runnin' to football, I joined in an' was glad of th' chance, havin' passed through a most painful session whilst every one—except Tim Best—was rawhidin' me. Blue was all agitated an' interested in th' game—which I would also 'a' been if it hadn't been for a series o' black looks that Tim showered at me from his blond an' otherwise-good-lookin' face.

I knowed there'd be a comeback from my buttin' in on th' Nascers' fam'ly affairs—an' here it was! Violet, feelin' under obligations to me, had overplayed my hand with Tim, an' thereby provided me with a "rival" which I neither craved or was entitled to. In fact, Tim couldn't hardly classify as a rival. He was "out," which made it worse! It put me in th' position o' havin' put him to rout, an', Lord knows, I didn't have any such aspirations. An' how could I go to him with my side of it without it lookin' like he'd scared me out or exposin' Violet as a "woman scorned?"

Besides which, she wasn't a "woman scorned"—none whatever. I admired

her plenty. She had a face an' figure that would 'a' caused Mr. Solomon himself a thrill—an' jealousy in his harem! But she was, too serious-minded—or too young, or too enthusiastic, or somethin', an' had me back into a corner, gaspin' for air. A man likes t' choose his own corners—an' th' one I'd chose would be shared by Gladys Belden—if by any.

The others, havin' a head start on me, got through eatin' before I did. Blue left th' table along with th' footballers, an' first thing I knowed I was practic'ly alone with my thoughts—an' Violet, who come in an' sat down opposite me. It was evident that she thought I'd done it a-purpose in order to have th' time with her!

Halstead, th' grocery man, an' Rieder, who sold real estate, pulled their freight after shakin' their fingers, playful, at me from behind Violet's back, favorin' me with knowin' smiles.

Tim Best slammed th' door as he went out—an' there I was with a heap on my mind an' no words to express it with!

Violet comments on a lot o' personal things an' then inquires abrupt, have I ever been in love?

"Well," says I, wishin' I'd eat breakfast somewhere else. "Hum. That's a hard question to answer—"

"I like that!" she retorts in a way to mean that she didn't, an' with a expression on her face that indicated her wild Irish had rose. It looked like a scene an' tears was impendin' so I rushed for th' handiest way out.

"It's just that I ain't used t' discussin' th' noble sentiment," I alibied myself, "an' I'm bashful. Sure, I'm in love right now." I held my thoughts steadfast to Gladys Belden.

"That's better!" Violet puckered up her mouth when she smiled—a most charmin' maneuver.

"Now what?" I considered frantic inside myself, "would Blue Danube do under similar circumstances. He's a

considerable ladies' man an' knows how t' handle 'em. I'll just get her int'rested in Blue, which will let me out without no casualties."

She babbles on about admirin' cow-boys an' how well I looked on a horse—which give me an openin'.

"Y'u just ought t' see my friend Blue Danielson sit th' snaky ones," I started; an' then I give her full plans an' specifications regardin' Blue's virtues an' attainments as a foot racer, fighter, an' friend. I was makin' progress, judgin' from th' attention she paid, when Blue stuck his head in th' room, inquiren' if I needed a rope.

"Come in," I invite. "I've just been tellin' Miss Violet how y'u recovered our horses when they was stole at San Lorenzo."

"Did y'u tell her how y'u pyramided y'ur bets on th' foot race an' like to ruined both of us?" Blue grins, sittin' down beside Violet.

"No, I didn't," says I, gratified. "You tell her while I run upstairs for my hat."

I was gone from there, leavin' Blue lookin' into her eyes an' employin' th' smile that had made him famous with th' girls on our home range.

Half a hour after this, Blue come to th' room an' inquired why I didn't get back. I told him I'd been writin' a letter.

"I was still tellin' 'em scary to Violet when her ma chased me out," he informs me.

An' I wondered why I didn't have some such luck!

Durin' that an' th' succeedin' two days previous to Thanksgivin', I divided my time between Violet, poker at Dorgan's place, an' practicin' football. Th' two latter items caused me less trouble than th' former. Violet would overtake me when I was least expectin' her—once as I was tryin' to slip through th' front door on my way to feed th'

horses; twice in th' hallway, an' sev'ral other times at different places. She never tired o' tellin' me what a favor I'd done her an' her mother in riddin' 'em o' Nascor—an' I bore up under it as brave as possible, always wishin' her off onto Blue when I had a chance. Blue didn't seem to mind it, on account, I judged at first, that she didn't put him on th' defensive all th' time.

But when Blue commenced remarkin' what a nice girl Violet was an' how funny that we hadn't discovered it till such a late date, my ears come to attention. It sounded like Blue was gettin' in deeper than I'd figured on. I didn't care much for th' sound o' that, an' thought I'd better give him some confidential information about how Violet'd been shinin' up to me. But if a man's in love he don't want advice from nobody; an' if he ain't he don't need it. So we played our own hands separate.

In spite o' knowin' it'd do no good, I suggested a couple times that we jump our contract with th' football team an' hit for home; but Blue voted it down, since I couldn't offer any good reason without tellin' him that I wanted to get away from Violet—which didn't sound very manful even when millin' it over with myself. If he'd consented I'd prob'ly 'a' backed down on leavin' because we'd give our promises to play with th' Railroaders an' our leavin' would cripple 'em. Moreover, it didn't look just right to leave Violet flat that way. Either we'd have to sneak off like a couple bums or else I, at least, would have t' submit to a most embarrassin' time in tellin' her good-by. I'd told her that Blue an' me would be on our way before long; an' if her conduct then was anythin' to judge by, I didn't crave to be in on th' finals.

What made it all th' more confusin' was that Violet'd never come right out an' say anythin' definite about her sentiments; it was all insinuation. She'd make a conversational pass to give me a

opportunity to say somethin' pleasant. When I didn't come across, she'd sulk an' weep; then I'd weaken an' everythin' was lovely. I planned to tell her, if I got th' proper lay, that I was engaged, but she never give me th' chance.

Our line o' repartee run somethin' like this:

"I'd love to live on a cow ranch—with the right man," she'd say it coy an' with a dangerous look in her eye.

Now, how could I say: "Well, it won't be with me. I'm engaged."

So I'd stall: "Women have to work terrible hard on ranches; most of 'em leave their husbands in a short time."

"But *you*," she'd vamp me, tearful an' confident, "wouldn't permit romance to die by letting *your* wife become a drudge."

"Well, maybe not," I'd hedge, "but I'm a terrible hard man to get along with. I wouldn't hesitate to beat up on a woman if she stirred my temper."

"*You?*" she'd laugh at me. "A woman could scare you out of the house with a cross look!"

She was right, but it didn't help my case none.

Did she have a idea that she owed me these attentions as a reward for disposin' of her undesirable stepdaddy? I did my best to disabuse her mind of any such notions. An' there was Blue leanin' over her at every excuse with a free line o' entertainin' chatter. It looked like I'd dug up another rival. If I was standin' in his way, all I wanted was to get out of it. Only I didn't seem t' know how—though I told Violet all th' favorable things I could think of concernin' him an' none about myself.

Now I wasn't pleased with Blue's prospects, either. I couldn't see where he'd have any luck even if he should marry Violet—she was that flighty an' temperamental. If she could switch overnight from Tim Best to me, it showed that her heart was in too many places at once; an' if Blue should man-

age to gather her affections, it would make her look more like a guessin' contest than a desirable helpmate. She'd also changed favorites in th' football game—bein' now a loyal rooter for th' Railroaders, whereas she'd formerly been a booster for th' Citizens.

Tim Best got surlier as th' days went by, an' on Thanksgivin' mornin' he offered to knock my block off when I made a offhand remark about how bad us Railroaders were goin' to beat th' Citizens. Callan an' Dorgan patched things up when I invited Tim to try his luck; but it was only temporary, because Tim swore he'd "get" me some other time. 'Course he wasn't just bowed up because I'd made a good-natured brag. We both knowed th' reason; but it was only me that knew how useless it was for us to quarrel.

All Agua Hondo postponed Thanksgivin' dinner till supper time in order to be at th' football grounds at half past two. Th' crowd was assembled on th' west side of th' field, since th' other side was occupied by prickly pears an' Spanish daggers.

Th' gridiron, which was supposed to 'a' been cleared by Mexicans, had been marked off with white lines an' was adorned promiscuous with cactus beds, sagebrush, an' buffalo grass. At each end, crossbars had been built ten or twelve foot above th' ground. If any one got close enough to 'em, he was supposed to kick th' ball over th' one that was handiest, providin' th' opposition didn't keep him from doin' so.

There wasn't a football suit on th' field. A few of th' players had diked 'emselves out in baseball clothes. Blue an' me were dressed in overalls an' hickory shirts—as were most of our team except "Cutie" Bull, at center, who was wearin' corduroys. His size was such that he had to get his overalls made special an' didn't want to risk 'em in th' game. He had another pair o' cordu-

roys ordered, so he figured he could spare those he had on!

A lanky well driller kicked off for th' Citizens an' Callan caught th' ball. I was told about Callan's catchin' it because, while I was watchin' th' football turn somersaults in th' air, Tim Best knocked me for a aurora borealis. I got up fightin' mad an' pursued him, but Callan barked out a signal an' I had to pass up Tim in order to get to my place on th' line.

I fell all over Hardrock Jansen, th' blacksmith, who played opposite me at tackle, when Cutie passed th' ball to Dale, th' quarter back. Jansen was peeved a lot an' swung a wicked haymaker at me when he come to his feet. Since Meador was travelin' around th' other end with th' ball, I give Jansen my undivided attention for a few seconds. Th' referee fined th' Railroaders twenty-five yards for my part in this fracas, claimin' he didn't see Jansen hit me. This set us back about twice what Meador'd gained.

Then Callan, who was runnin' th' team from his position at full back, called th' signal for Blue to make what they called a "cross-tackle buck." I was supposed t' clear a path for Blue to carry th' ball into. Cutie hadn't no more'n passed th' pigskin when Jansen walloped me alongside th' jaw. Now, I'd been fined for doin' just that to him a minute before, so I didn't take no chances on th' referee seein' me—an' rammed Jansen in th' solar plexus with my head. So Blue had tolerable clear sailin' till he hit th' second line o' defense, which treated him pretty rough—but not till he'd gained ten yards.

Jansen lost some more steam when Blue repeated twice through th' same place for fifteen yards more an' Tim Best called for time out while he swapped places with th' blacksmith.

Business had been good while Jansen was playin' against me; but with Tim on th' job it picked up even more.

He knowed more about scientific slug-gin'—so th' referee wouldn't see him at it—an' punished me somethin' scandalous. He'd played th' game in college.

Now, I'd had designs on helpin' Tim make a hero of hisself by lettin' him break through me occasional, figurin' that if he distinguished hisself, Violet'd look at him with favor; but th' odds were too much against me. In th' first place, I didn't enjoy th' idea of bein' a choppin' block for Tim's diversions without defendin' myself; an' in th' second place, Blue was demonstratin' hisself to be more of a hero than I could 'a' made out o' Tim, anyhow.

I looked over to th' side lines where Violet was jumpin' up an' down, yellin', "Danielson! Danielson!" an' saw Blue's finish! From his remarks, I felt confident that he was a heap interested in her; so, with her all excited over him—there wasn't but one answer! That let me *out*; but it was cold comfort because it meant that Blue was *in*. Besides th' prospect o' losin' my pal to a girl that never would make him happy, I felt responsible for exposin' him to such sentimental danger.

Th' whole Citizens' team concentrated behind Tim, an' we couldn't push Blue for any more gains. We lost th' ball on downs.

Th' Citizens started to work their full back through Smilin' Dorgan at center, an' human forms piled up ten deep—for Cutie Bull upset all calculations an' half th' opposition. Fists flew an' blood flowed. Th' bank teller who played at quarter back for th' Citizens matched Blue for a fight—which ended up with another penalty for th' Railroaders an' a substitute for th' Citizens. Tim an' me, meantime, fought another round.

Play was resumed in a rough an' industrious manner, with me gettin' th' worst of Tim's scientific slug-gin'.

Twice th' Railroaders, due t' Blue's ability to carry th' ball, were within twenty yards of th' Citizens' goal; an' each time Tim annoyed me with his fists so much that I clouted him for varyin' distances in sight of th' referee. On four other occasions Railroaders got set back for *finishin'* battles that had been *started* by Citizens.

Th' first half ended with no scorin' accomplished, an' when th' Railroaders grouped together for th' intermission, I had some remarks to make.

"I understand that fist fightin' is part o' th' game. All I've ever seen have broken up in a row," says I. "But, long's it's that way, why should th' referee fine us for doin' what th' opposition indulges in regular?"

Callan was nursin' a swelled eye, which Mills, one of th' Citizens' half backs, had presented him with. All th' Railroaders were crippled up more or less; Blue an' me, specially, lookin' like we'd been tamperin' with a sausage mill.

"Let's submit a proposition that th' referee forget penalties on rough work," suggests Bull, whose voice an' name had considerable in common.

This idea got immediate support from all hands.

Callan met with th' referee an' Tim Best to talk it out. Tim an' th' referee roared a lot, but agreed, fin'ly, that it'd be every man for hisself in th' second half.

Callan kicked off for th' Railroaders an' Blue come streakin' past me up th' field, hurdlin' brush an' cacti. Three Citizens got in his road an' all took a swing at him; Blue dodged 'em without reply; upset th' interference an' Callan nailed th' man with th' ball, who happened to be Mills. Mills tried a short-arm jab, such as he'd been usin', havin' forgotten about th' new rule—or lack of it—an' Callan waited till he'd got to his feet an' bounced his fist off Mills' left eye.

Mills hollered for th' referee.

"Stand up and fight, you yellow pup!" Callan shouts. "You've been doin' that all afternoon and this is the first honest chance I've had at you!"

Mills didn't care about that kind o' warfare an' th' ball went into play prompt. "Hippo" Adair, th' Citizens' full back, crashed through me for a nice gain o' five yards, but stopped when Meador an' Blue gathered his neck an' legs.

This Adair person was a coal miner from Gallup who had been workin' as Jansen's assistant in th' blacksmith shop. He didn't weigh quite so much as a horse, but he had some of a bronk's accomplishments—kickin' an' strikin'—so, after he got through walkin' over my carcass an' half a dozen Citizens worked me over with their feet an' knuckles, I got up, shakin' my head like a fairgrounded bull—an' with about as much animation.

Right away th' Citizens shot Adair through my tackle again. There was a battle over my body which I found out afterward was waged by Meador an' Blue against Mills an' Tim, who were tryin' to finish me off. Tim was after my hide, but it was some comfort to know he'd had to call in th' reserves.

When th' next play took place, I found myself behind th' line, weavin' to an' fro, with Callan's arm around me for support.

"Blue's in your position," Callan whistles through his windpipe. "You'll be all right in a minute."

He left me; dove over th' heads of linemen an' gathered Adair by a scalp lock. Him an' Blue made a team all by theirselves! Adair's charge was a most dismal failure that time—resultin' in a loss o' several yards—an' Tim emerged lookin' like he'd been through a earthquake. He'd assaulted Blue, thinkin' it was me in a weakened condition. He prob'ly still thinks he

hubbed me an' wonders how I made so quick a recovery, for I was back in position on th' next play—which was lucky, because otherwise Blue wouldn't 'a' had th' chance to use his famous speed.

Hippo, thinkin' some error was accountable for his loss, took th' ball for another charge through me. But he never got to th' line. I dove under Tim, thus upsettin' him; Callan went through th' beach an' hit Hippo so hard he dropped th' ball—which Blue gathered before it reached th' ground—accordin' to all reports—an' was in th' clear with his first jump.

Citizens might's well 'a' pursued a antelope, for Blue, with th' ball tucked under his arm, was gone from there, leapin' from one clump o' bunch grass to another like 'Liza crossin' th' Delaware on ice cakes. Only little Sackett, th' substitute quarter back, was between Blue an' th' goal line when I fin'ly shook Tim off me an' could view th' proceedin's. Sackett threwed hissself at Blue, who was then movin' at race-horse speed, an' come to rest in a bed o' cactus at about th' time Blue, who side-stepped, flashed under th' cross-bars an' into th' midst of a throng o' outraged Citizens that were shoutin': "Crook!" "Dirty work!" an' "Kill 'im!"

Blue disappeared under a human avalanche. Railroad shopmen an' a few husky engineers flocked to th' rescue.

I never have figured out what foul play was supposed to 'a' been committed by Blue; but I realized right then that he needed much help with th' least possibly delay. So I started leggin' it down th' field pronto, though not so fast as Callan, Brick, an' Meador, who were real sprinters.

I come to a sudden stop under th' impression that a mule had disputed th' right o' way. I'd forgot about Tim, but it seemed that he'd remembered me

an' had singled me out for private reasons an' personal attention. His face was grass an' dirt-scarred; his nose was off-center an' his eyes showed signs o' wear, but littered like a mad stallion's, I once saw. I absorbed these details along with a couple well-placed blows before gettin' into action. From then on business was right brisk. I knocked him loose from th' ground three times while he was dealin' out misery to me. Th' last time he didn't rise up again.

I rambled on to th' main hostilities, anxious about Blue. Th' town constable an' a few deputies complicated matters by tryin' to arrest folks. Two of 'em took me in charge, but Brick, who was disengaged at th' moment, pulled 'em loose an' threw 'em to one side.

"Where's Blue?" I asked Brick. His shirt was almost completely gone an' he was pantin'.

"Over there!" Brick waves a badly skinned-up hand toward th' northeast an' I spied Blue, workin' side by side with Cutie Bull an' takin' on all comers. That relieved me. Long as Blue was on his feet, there was no cause for worry so far as physical results was concerned. Th' only bad features about it was that he was still further distinguishin' hissself for Violet's benefit. Every woman admires a fighter, an' I had no doubt but that Violet was in th' screamin' mob o' ladies that were bunched together in th' background. I couldn't locate her, but I was satisfied that she was there, rootin' for Blue an' ready to fall on his neck just as soon as th' war ended.

All this run through my head in a few seconds; then Brick an' me was called on to repel boarders who swarmed down on us from all sides. It didn't seem to make any diff'rence how many we discouraged; there was always more to take their places. They were sure earnest with their fists!

"That's th' time, Dutch!" I heard Blue's yell of encouragement; an' Cutie give a roar to back him up. Th' pair of 'em forced th' fightin' over to our side of th' battlefield, an' with their help we waded in more cheerful an' confident.

How long would it take a town divided against itself to come to a decision with fists? I'd admire to know! We didn't find out on that Thanksgiving Day because th' fire whistle blew whilst both sides were goin' strong. Each warrior halted in his tracks at th' first blast an' then those that were able ran west in th' direction of th' main part o' town.

Agua Hondo, bein' built o' wood, didn't dare take any chances on fire, an' th' siren had been designed to remind all persons of this fact. It had a voice that wailed an' shrieked an' chilled th' heart. No one could hear it without bein' certain that it was his own house that was bein' burnt up, an' becomin' frantic for fear his wife an' children were in it. If a man didn't have any fam'ly he was sure to think of a dozen reasons, all equally good, why he should lend a hand. Th' siren had a personal note for every one.

Therefore th' lame an' those that were halted for some other cause, were helped by th' able-bodied in th' rush for town. Th' fight was over as prompt as it had begun—an' for a far better reason! Blue an' me, bein' both convinced that th' barn containin' Scrapper an' Salvador was in flames, were makin' all possible speed across th' football field when I thought about Tim.

"Let's see how Tim's makin' out," I called at Blue. He was fast losin' me in th' mob.

We hurried through th' crowd an' found Tim where I'd left him—but not near so much alone! Violet had his head propped in her lap an' was spongin' his face with her handker-

chief! I couldn't 'a' been more surprised at seein' a calf climb a tree! But Blue just wore th' same expression he does when he stands pat on two pair.

"We ain't needed here," says Blue. "Let's go."

But Violet spied us an' withdrew her support from Tim immediate to rise up an' storm at me.

"Beast!" she proclaims to my intense astonishment. "Thug! Plug-ugly! Coward! You've all but killed my Timmie!"

"Why—th' darn roughneck like to ruined me before I could defend myself," I blurted out, mad.

"Liar!" she screamed in what I didn't consider a very ladylike manner. "Ruffian! You picked on him because of me!"

I couldn't figure her out. I didn't try very long. Neither could I understand why she didn't pay no 'tention to Blue, who had nothin' to say but kept his face, which was naturally lean but now plump from swellin', in straight lines.

We drug it—a quarter mile behind th' main stampede.

There was no fire! Not even any smoke!

Whoever tied down th' siren did it to break up th' fight. Cutie Bull's wife was suspected because she had disapproved th' football game on account of its bein' so rough an' she was afraid Cutie'd get hurt! But it couldn't be proved on her. Neither did any one propose resum'in' hostilities. Women-folks led their men home to give first aid. Unattached gents assembled at Dorgan's bar for stimulants an' information. It was discovered that th' orchestra was too badly damaged to perform that night an' th' dance was called off.

Railroaders claimed vict'ry, o' course, on account o' Blue's touchdown; Citi-



zens were consoled by th' thought that their side might 'a' won if th' game had been continued—which was impossible because th' football had been wrecked.

Blue an' me beat it to th' hotel for a bath an' change o' clothes. Our football outfits were in rags an' neither of us were feelin' any too peart, bein' covered with bruises an' cuts.

"There's nothin' further to hold us in this man's town," Blue opines as we're slippin' into our moleskin pants, "an' we'll be so lamed up we can't move if we wait till mornin' to make a start. Why don't we leave this evenin'? We can gather us some lunch at Dorgan's an' make to Rianoco by midnight."

Blue looked anxious an' I judged he wanted t' make a quick get-away on account o' unpleasant recollections which had to do with Tim an' Violet. I'd heard that a man is keen to leave th' scene of a unsuccessful love affair.

"Suits me," says I. "We can mail a check to Mrs. Nascer as we pass th' post office. I'm r'arin' to get aboard my pony. This footwork has got me all stove up."

Blue give me a queer look but said nothin' an' begun to roll his few belongin's inside his slicker. I did similar with mine. We worked fast an' made it from th' hotel before Violet showed up.

Within a half hour we were saddled up an' on our way home across th' prairie. We had some trouble gettin' away from Dorgan's, where survivin' members o' both teams—includin' Callan, Brick, Meador, Adair, Jansen, an' Cutie Bull, who'd slipped away from his wife—were comf'tably lit up an' playin' th' game all over again.

"Dutch," says Blue in tones o' sympathy. "I'm sorry for y'u, but I can't help but think it's all for th' best!"

That was almost exactly th' speech I'd had framed for him!

"Don't waste emotions on me," I reassured him. "All I regret is that you

couldn't 'a' fell in love with some girl that I approved of."

"Me fall in love?" Blue demands. "If I've been that way, some one is holdin' out on me. S'pose we understand each other."

So I told Blue th' facts, sort o' shamefaced, battin' my eyes in th' red light o' sunset.

"You just don't understand about women," he advises me solemn, with a hand on my arm, "an' consequently I couldn't work intelligent. When y'u left Violet with me Monday I was convinced that y'u did so for th' purpose o' havin' me further y'ur interests with her. Therefore I told her, patronizin', that you was unpopular with th' ladies, didn't have much sense, an' that I palled with y'u only because I felt sorry for y'u—at th' same time boostin' my own stock. She figured, o' course, that I was buildin' a stack at her an' was knockin' you for my own purposes and——"

"O—o—o! Is that th' way to work it?" I sputtered.

"Sure!" Blue informs me. "Y'u make a hero out of a man an' a girl hates him on sight. Knock him an' she's plum' satisfied that y'u're doin' so from selfish motives. They've always got sympathy for th' under dog——"

"Then tell me why was she so tickled when I worked on her stepdaddy?"

"No woman admires a quitter," he explains.

"An' Tim won Violet back by puttin' up a game fight an' bein' knocked out?"

"That's it."

"An' s'pose Tim had cleaned up on me?"

"Then Violet'd been weepin' over you 'stead o' Tim."

"So that's th' way of a woman's heart!"

"Violet's," says Blue, terse an' confusin'. "They're all diff'rent!"



# Bedtime Stories for Grownups *by* Russel M. Crouse

## I.—A PRICE ON HIS HEAD

NIGHT, big black blanket that it is, had fallen upon the Big Woods and tucked its furry, finny, feathery populace to sleep. It was so dark that a barrel of pitch would have loomed up like a bonfire. Only the sentinel of the law, Pat the Police Dog, remained awake, and his eyelids were drooping like the grand finale rose of summer. If only something would happen, he mused, as he ambled aimlessly over the same old monotonous beat.

Then suddenly and unmistakably there came a sound. Pat's ears flapped back against his head with a bump that jarred him into full wakefulness. It was a voice. He listened intently. Once before he'd thought he'd heard a "Sh-h-h," only to discover to his official embarrassment that it was just a couple of trees whispering. But this time it was the real thing. He ducked behind an ash can and listened.

"There's a big price on your head, I tell you," he heard in a muffled tone. "To-night's your last chance to escape. Get out of here—go to the hills, anywhere—and wait until this thing blows over. They'll get you sure to-morrow, go!"

Pat recognized the voice as that of Gay Dog, well known canine about town. A likable ne'er-do-well, Gay Dog, but

none too careful about his companions. Pat had long suspected that some day evil associates would be his undoing.

But there was no time now to think of Gay Dog. Here was a fugitive from justice, a criminal with a price on his head. Pat was still thinking about that rhine-stone collar he'd buy with the reward when he heard the crackling of bushes and turned to see two forms.

Gun in claw he dived into the underbrush on the trail of the desperado. It was dark, but soon he had his quarry—a strange rough-necked, red-headed fellow.

By the time the Common Fleas court had convened next morning the officer had rounded up his material witness as well. Judge Sober Owl listened to Pat's story, then called Gay Dog to the stand.

"This is a terrible outrage," barked the material witness with a snort. "Terry Turkey is a bird of high ideals!"

"But," broke in Pat petulantly, "I heard this witness himself say this prisoner had a price on his head. He must be some dangerous——"

"Dangerous, nothing," came back Gay Dog. "Of course he's got a price on his head. Seventy-two cents a pound. To-morrow's Thanksgiving. That's more than you'd bring on Fourth of July with a hot-dog famine at Coney Island."



# Seven Furlongs and a Jump

by Sam Carson

Author of "The Flash of Eyes," etc.

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SOMETHING WAS GOING ON OVER AT JOCKEY DEAN'S HOUSE, SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT, AND RIGHT AT THE FINISH OF THE BIG HANDICAP. . . .

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**W**HEN a young man has been taking reckless chances with fate, riding his mounts to victory with an abandon that brought sorrowful shakes of heads from veteran turfmen, and then suddenly plays a conservative hand in a gruelling race, his status as a jockey comes under criticism.

It was in the City Handicap at Bourbon track, with a May sun smiling on the Kentucky landscape. Billy Dean's mount, Mayberry, a bay gelding, ruled favorite in the mile classic. And yet Mayberry came into the home stretch, pocketed, his rider refusing a forlorn hope dash at a meager opening offered on the quarter turn. Billy Dean finished third and was given credit for a poor ride, which was partly merited.

"Sugar Foot" Williams, his ebony face drawn into worse than lugubrious, took charge of Mayberry when Billy dismounted and headed for the weighing room beneath the judges' stand.

"Hold up yore head hawss," he consoled; "somepin done happen to Mister Billy. He's gone and lost his ridin' habits."

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Johnny Dodge and Jimmie Wheeler were discussing the same matter up at jockeys' quarters. "You betcha Mayberry had the edge; he could have slipped me into the second hole an eighth away if Billy had cleared the pocket;" asserted Johnny; "I got a hunch he's lost his nerve."

"Wrong dope," drawled a melancholy voice—"Slippery" Sam's; no one had seen or heard him enter. "He's playing safe—I got the info straight."

There were many who held Slippery Sam to be a spy of the track officials. At least he was an employee whose duties were never fully known. But he loaned money cheerfully and handed out a benevolent line of philosophy. Many swipes, hostlers, and jockeys often wondered at the lifting of a ban, perhaps, unjustly, at least hastily, placed. Few credited Slippery Sam with being a contributing factor.

"You're all wrong," the newcomer repeated. "Billy's still good for the pilot-house job. He's getting fat for one thing; can't ride unless he reduces for a ride under a hundred and five. But

here's the low down—there's a visitor scheduled for the Dean castle. And he's not coming by train or auto or on foot. He's arriving by air—when he gets here—and driven by a stork chauffeur. Get me? Dean rode Mayberry to-day with a whole family on his shoulders. Don't blame him for being safe."

Jimmie Wheeler was another benedict; it had been a matter of weeks since his wedding down at New Orleans. Slippery Sam's explanation caused him to be thoughtful for a time.

"I never looked at it that way," Jimmie admitted. "First place, I never took the chances Billie Dean did. But I'm just a plug jockey; never expect to be the top notcher Billie is. If I see a fighting chance, I take it, and that's all."

"Billie made 'em," vouchsafed Slippery Sam. "That's the diff. Now his gambling with luck has hit him in the face, all in a wad, and he's slumped. He'll be over it. Hope so, for he is going to need some coin darned bad."

Johnny Dodge was changing clothes; he was not riding again that day. "The trouble with you, Billie Dean, and me—everybody—is we've always a handicap to pack. Me, I'm off of this married life for keeps, but I've got troubles of my own. There's the old gent and my mother up in Pennsylvania. They're still wondering how in thunder I took to the track and send me sermons to repent of my ways. But you bet your boots I send them a check each month and they take it. Life's blasted funny."

Slippery Sam looked at Johnny with heightened interest. "'Umbrella' Mike told me you had something more than cobwebs in the watch tower, but I doubted it. Now I apologize. Don't forget Billie." He slouched down the narrow stairway, humming softly.

"Curious bird," commented Johnny, brushing his hair before the distorted mirror on the wall. "He wants to help Dean out and don't know how—yet.

Sa-a-ay," he turned to Jimmie, "suppose we can help the kid, slip him a loan for instance? At least we can perk him up."

The jockeys from the sixth race were ascending the stairway, Billie Dean in the group. "So long Jimmie," called Johnny; "we'll talk that over to-morrow."

With that strange efficiency peculiar to the turf, the news about Billie Dean spread so that it was common knowledge the next day. Furthermore, Old Marse, the Blakely entry for the Blue Grass cup, was handicapped at a hundred and three pounds. Even the owner was amazed at the light impost. But if Blakely was amazed, Billie Dean was dazed; his actual weight was one hundred and six, and he would have to reduce. The race was only five days ahead.

There was a council of war over at the Blakely stables. Umbrella Mike, although trainer for the Florella string, and hoping devoutly that Star Lad would be the cup winner, had visited Big Jim Blakely and advised a holiday period for Billie Dean. He had been inspired by the appeal of Johnny Dodge, for whom Umbrella betrayed a fondness. So Billy, whose dreams had been filled with visions of rotund jockeys, unable to mount their entries, received orders to ride no more until the Blue Grass cup, and to submit to a drastic diet.

Sugar Foot Williams hovered outside the stable office and met the jockey. "Mister Billy," he urged, "I wukked in a prize-fighter's camp once. Let me take you for a road run ev'ry mawnin'. It'll pull you down."

That was the reason, the next morning, shortly after sunrise, Slippery Sam, heading for the track, stopped and gasped. Puffing, although still trotting, up the road came Billie Dean and the negro hostler. The jockey was un-

steady, although holding on to his pace grimly. Sugar foot favored Slippery Sam with a wide grin as they passed.

"Mah boy's going to reduce hisself to plum' nothin' if he has to," he announced.

They had gone a block before the on-looker closed his mouth. "Durn his hide," commented the track employee, heading toward Bourbon park. Four hours later he had an earnest conversation with Judge Roberts, arbiter of Bourbon track destinies. The track official shook his head. "No, Sam, I can't do it. The handicap cannot be changed. I admit Old Marse is carrying a light load, but there are better horses with comparatively light imposts—Star Lad for example, with a hundred and ten pounds."

Judge Roberts walked away, with a final shake of the head. The other gazed ruefully toward the white frame house, visible between stables, a block distant from the track's outer fence, where Billie Dean, his wife and aunt made their home.

"I did my best," defended Slippery Sam.

Of afternoons Billie would come over and himself work out Old Marse. His face lost some of its fullness. Sugar Foot's training on the road, coupled with strict dieting, was telling. It had done far more than that; Billie was becoming weak. He learned that as they rounded the turn below the clubhouse stand and Billie thought of trying out Old Marse in the center of the track, which was still spongy from recent sprinkling. Old Marse held grimly to his rail position, and Billie was compelled to take an additional wrap of the lines to veer his mount to mid-track. He alighted after the exercise, heart racing, and staggered to the rail after handing the lines over to Sugar Foot.

"Whassa matter, Mister Billy?" inquired the negro, alarmed.

"Oh—nothing. Too much training,

I guess." That afternoon he weighed a hundred and three pounds. He lost two more pounds before Saturday, the day of the cup race dawned. He should have been exultant over this fact, but he forgot it, due to subsequent events.

For the doctor, who came to the Dean home very often now, shook his head that morning. "I'll be back at noon," he announced. Aunt Mary smiled, but Billy's face grayed. He followed the physician to the door.

"Say doctor? Does this mean——"

"I imagine it does," cut in the practitioner. "But you go ahead in that race to-day. I like to see husbands out making money; they're fairly useless on occasions like this, anyway. Besides, I believe Old Marse will win the cup."

Aunt Mary led her nephew to the breakfast table. "Eat what you want this time. It won't count. And don't worry. You need the two hundred coming if Old Marse wins. Besides, I'll hang out a bed sheet from the attic window if—if anything should happen."

The jockey sat before an untasted breakfast for a half hour. Then he arose and went into a darkened bedroom where a wan face smiled up at him. Aunt Mary, who had been talking gently, arose and left the room suddenly, leaving the couple alone.

"Honey, you go ahead and ride to-day," she insisted. "Maybe—maybe—Aunt Mary told me about going to hang out the bedsheet as her signal to you over at the track—maybe she won't hang it out until after the race. And Billie, dear, I want you to win so bad."

He reached awkwardly for her hand. There was a lump in his throat. "I guess we need money all right, even if I have our savings account to draw on. But I won't be able to keep my eyes away from home while I'm over at the track. I'll be praying every minute to get back before—before it is over."

Both were silent, a little awed at coming events. They heard the screen door to the kitchen shut and a masculine voice conversing with Aunt Mary. Billie gazed at his wife, whose lips were trembling ever so slightly. He bent over her.

"Are you afraid, Margaret?"

She smiled bravely back. "No," she protested.

It was Aunt Mary who summoned him to duty. "Billie, you go over to the track and see Old Marse gets his exercise like you want it. I don't care if Mr. Blakely has trainers by the dozen. It's a jockey's place to watch his horse on race day. So get!"

As Billie left the porch he saw the familiar outlines of Slippery Sam's back, hustling up the street. "Now where in the world has he been?" he wondered.

Fifteen minutes to post time for the fifth race—the Blue Grass cup! The usual air of tension hung over the track, preliminary to the big race. The jockeys, hovering about the veranda above the throngs entering the paddock, gazed at crowds milling before the pari mutuel machines beneath the stands.

Johnny Dodge tapped Billie Dean on the shoulder. "Say, you ought to see the swell field glasses Umbrella Mike asked me to keep for him this afternoon."

"Glasses! Say, loan them to me a second," implored Billy. Johnny handed them over, turning to wink at his fellow riders. Billie adjusted the binoculars and leveled them on his home, visible over the fence beyond the seven furlong chute. There was no signal displayed from the attic window; the house seemed deserted.

"If you want anybody to keep an eye on your mansion to see nobody steals it, Overby here will watch," announced Johnny. "He's not riding to-day, just loafing around."

Billie regarded the other's face a moment. "Say fellows, guess I just as well tell you about it. There's going to be——"

"We know," cut in Jimmie Wheeler; "all of us, and we're for you, Billie. Only ride hell out of Old Marse, for I'm out to win with Whoopalong."

"Same goes here for Star Lad," said Johnny Dodge.

"I don't mean my reducing and all that," protested Billie, "I mean over at home, there's——"

"I said we know," repeated Jimmie Wheeler.

Billie glanced first from one to another, then to little Overby, already at his post with the glasses. "Johnny," he inquired, "is that the reason you brought those glasses here?"

"Slippery Sam told us," replied Johnny. "We want to help you and that's all we could think of—just watching for the signal."

The fifth race bugle blew. A quiet line of jockeys filed down the stairway and into the paddock. Billie was trembling, so much that Sugar Foot, who was holding Old Marse's saddle, muttered as he placed it on: "you isn't scared are you, Mister Billy?"

"Only that I won't get out in front and stay there."

Over the hostler's face spread a grin. "Boy, comes that mount order this nigger is running for the ticket window. I bin afraid—now I ain't. Go through lak you used to Mister Billy, thass all."

The bugle sounded again. The line filed out, through the paddock gate and on to the track for the parade to the seven furlong chute. As they came by the jockey veranda, Billie glanced up at Overby. "Nothing doing," shouted the watcher. Forgot was the stands as Billie, riding Number Four, came into sight of his home again in front of the clubhouse. The attic was still deserted. "Oh, Lord," he entreated; "let it be after this race is over."

A pause—the starter's hand fell—the webbing flashed upward. A mighty roar swept through the crowd. The line of eight dashed out of the chute, abreast, a pretty sight, jockeys' colors blended into one glory of gorgeous shades. Only the veterans saw Star Lad ease quietly into the lead and realized the Florella horse would be hugging the rail within another eighth. Johnny Dodge was executing Umbrella Mike's carefully laid campaign. It was one of the few times the real owner of the string, Morgan, came to Bourbon track. He was up there, in the reserved section, watching through a pair of glasses. Umbrella clung to the rail—his usual position—gazing with eyes only.

Something else was stirring up the backfield, well filled at the end of the first quarter. It was Whoopalong, going into the first division. The field had shifted now for the turn, battling for position in the gruelling home stretch fight. Daughtry, patrol judge, galloping along the infield ahead of the racers, was first to see Old Marse wake up. But he could not see Billie's gray face, weakening grip, voice intoning monotonously: "Got to win—got to win."

It was a flash of the old spirit. Riding with lines still wrapped about his wrists, Billie leaned forward, saw an opening to his right. Old Marse felt the whip, then a tug of the reins.

"Cæsar's ghost!" ejaculated the patrol judge. "Number Four went through just like an eel. Watch him! It will be him and Star Lad on the home stretch."

The same opinion was given by the crowds in the stands a moment later. Daughtry was right; the bay gelding rounded the turn and into the home stretch, on Star Lad's flanks. Johnny Dodge, glancing under his elbow, saw the pounding hoofs gaining at every plunge. Hand riding, he fought at this

menace, but felt, rather than saw, Old Marse draw up, until before they neared the upper end of the stands, Star Lad was dropping back. With his whip pounding every stride, Billie Dean rode Old Marse beneath the wire a half length ahead. Rising in his stirrups, he began to pull up his mount. Within two hundred yards he would have turned and ambled back to the judges' stand, but his eyes subconsciously raised and gazed toward his home. He gasped.

A white sheet was waving from the attic window.

Bourbon track has had unusual happenings, but none more so than Billie Dean's astounding performance after winning the Blue Grass cup. Pounding on down and around the oval, old Marse and rider reached the mouth of the seven furlong chute. Into it they turned, Old Marse gaining speed every jump. A chorus of "Ah-h-h's" swept from the stands. Judge Roberts leaned over the railing of the judges' stand and made frantic signals to Daughtry, patrol official, now racing his wiry cow pony—a veteran accustomed to the hummocky infield—toward the chute.

Umbrella Mike forgot Star Lad's defeat. He climbed to the top of the track fence and watched the plunging thoroughbred. There is a gate opening through the outer track fence, at the farther end of the chute.

"He's going to jump!" shouted Umbrella.

Five thousand pairs of eyes, voices silent, watched Old Marse approach the five-foot, whitewashed fence across the end of the chute. Big Jim Blakely, standing in his box on the clubhouse veranda, groaned.

"Crazy—he's gone mad, and Old Marse never took a jump in his life."

Even as he spoke the gelding slid over the barrier like a veteran steeple-chaser, brought up with barely a stumble, and galloped toward the gate,

swung open. A moment later horse and rider vanished.

Silence hung over the stands for a matter of seconds, then every one began talking and shouting. Sugar Foot Williams, who had been waiting expectantly before the judges' stand for Billie's return, began to run down the track. In the excitement no one saw Daughtry make a small gate to the track, cross it, cut across and out again, darting behind a row of stables in the general direction Old Marse had taken.

Morgan, owner of Florella stables and Star Lad, shoved his way through the voluble crowds and reached the judges' stand. He was followed by Blakely.

"Hey," shouted Morgan to Judge Roberts, "I'm going to protest for Star Lad."

Ten minutes passed. Then a negro appeared on the track, leading a wearied race horse. As they neared the stands, the crowd recognized Old Marse. Sugar Foot was leading the gelding. A slender figure slipped out from the group along the track fence and met the negro. Even a hundred yards away, the negro's grin was visible. Slippery Sam exchanged a few brief words and then ran back toward the judges' stand.

"What happened?" a score of voices inquired. The runner shook his head and padded up the stairway. Gaining Judge Roberts' ear he whispered:

"It's a boy."

"What!"

"Yes, sir." And to the track officials Slippery Sam told the story; how Billie had seen the signal. Morgan, listening in amazement, was the first to laugh.

"Man! You tell me that boy pulled off such a stunt to see his kid! Why, I don't blame him. Let me tell you——"

But Blakely, owner of Old Marse, was still nettled. "Suppose that fool boy had broken my horse's neck; I'm going to let him go."

"Do," entreated Morgan, "do, and I'll

sign him on. Judge, I withdraw my protest. And my compliments to Old Marse for that jump."

"That is all very fine," observed Judge Roberts. "Glad you feel that way about it, but the rules have been violated, and we must discipline the jockey. Why, there he comes now."

Daughtry, leading his pony, walked alongside a subdued Billie Dean. Shouts of approval and derision came from the stands.

But the jockey gazed stolidly downward while Daughtry seemed to repress an inclination to smile. The throng outside made way for them to go into the judges' stand.

From the veranda of the jockeys' quarters, Johnny Dodge and Jimmie Freeman took turns gazing at the scene through the borrowed glasses.

"What you see?" demanded Jimmie.

"They're giving him cain," informed Johnny. "Well, whatta you know about that! Morgan is patting Billie on the shoulder. Old Big Jim Blakely is grinning. So is Judge Roberts. Wonder what happened?"

Slippery Sam told them later. At that moment Daughtry had just notified the judges he had followed Billie Dean to the house. "He never was out of sight from the time he jumped off Old Marse, Judge. He never slipped any weights—didn't want to for that matter. But he can go on the scales with a clean record because I came back with him."

"This is most unusual," announced Judge Roberts. He held a short session with the other officials, then turned to Billie Dean.

"You are suspended—indefinitely," he said. "Let me see, to-day is Saturday. Suppose you come around Monday, before the first race, we might reconsider your case."

A moment later the stands roared. Number Four went up on the infield board; Old Marse was declared winner.



# The Mad Dog

by Robert  
Terry  
Shannon



Author of "The Hard Guy," "The Chow-Mein Kid," etc.

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LYMAN CREECH HAD PLANNED IT WELL, AND GAP RAMBO SEEMED NEAR THE END. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT EUNICE THAT RENDERED CREECH HELPLESS, HIS WORDS MERE WORDS. . . . .

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**G**AP RAMBO marveled that a wound so small could produce so much pain, so much fever. From time to time he felt it tenderly; a seared gash through his hair where a bullet had ripped the flesh of his scalp. He had missed death by the quarter of an inch.

In the last six hours he had covered no more than a mile from the scene of the shooting. For the most part he had skulked in the underbrush that grew thick and tangled on the side of the mountain. His pursuers were everywhere. At times he crawled flat on his belly like a stricken animal.

The blood had run down over his face and his fine soft shirt of white cambric; had dried, sticky and black. Lying close to the earth under a mass of sumac, breathing the acrid stagnant air, he tried to orient his whirling thoughts.

He had ridden into Sighing Pine to force an understanding with old Nehemiah Mercer; had met the aged

banker in the little dirt street of the Ozark village. Nehemiah had berated him with high-pitched, carrying vituperation.

"Don't dare mention Eunice's name! Reckon you'll get her an' my money after I'm gone!" The old man's face had been livid with passion. Gap had wondered that Eunice could be this man's daughter. "No lazy, card-playing bully—"

Gap had gotten down off his horse. People, a few of them, were looking from a distance. He tried to lead the old man across the street, to get him into the comparative seclusion of the pines that grew in a fringe at the foot of the hill.

Two shots, brief seconds apart, had split the air. The first had knocked off Gap's black felt hat, staggered him. The second punctured Nehemiah Mercer in the throat just above his low white collar. A look of surprise crossed his face, and he crumpled slowly with his

life blood pulsating down over his stiff-fronted shirt. Immediately, death began to glaze the banker's eyes.

Gap had been stunned, paralyzed. A woman's shrill voice rose. "Gap Rambo—shot—Nehemiah!"

Sure, they'd think that. He was as mystified as a babe, as innocent. But he was Gap Rambo, the sport, the gambler, the gun toter!

A shotgun belched, rained leaden pellets around him, from the porch of the general store. Sim Agnew, the merchant, was trying to shoot him down—like he was a mad dog.

In a confusion of blood and pain and self-preservative instincts, Gap had taken a bound to cover, had become, of necessity, a fugitive. They would say that he had tried to make love to a respectable girl, a rich man's daughter, and had, in a tempest of passion, murdered her parent. Mad Dog, that was they called him "Mad Dog" Rambo.

Well, there were a dozen men in the hills who would hide him. The nearest sanctuary, he judged, was Tom Taylor's cabin. The beauty of it was that it was so close to town, a scant two miles back in the thickness. They, his pursuers, would expect him to go deeper into the hills. There was a deep satisfaction in the knowledge that the lazy hounds around Sighing Pine couldn't sniff at his fallen hat and pick up the trail through the brush. They'd have to send to Harrisonville for blooded dogs; it would take a whole day and a night by stage. The trail would be cold.

Gap Rambo reached around to his hip pocket and felt for his revolver. It was safe, fully loaded, unfired. Taylor would hide him. More, he would stick by and fight for a Rambo in a pinch. Old Tom Taylor and Gap's father had been bushwhackers together in the days of the Civil War.

The blood bond was unbreakable. If only Gap could reach the cabin. Even in the thick shadows of the wildness

the terrific heat of the sun, riding high in the afternoon sky, made itself felt. A myriad of singing insects flew in a constant circle around the blood stains. The spittle in Gap's mouth had dried up. Tongue and throat were leathery.

Somehow, he emerged into a clearing; got onto his feet, and began a weaving course to the cabin that shimmered like a vision before his eyes. Down in the road Gap was dimly aware that some one astride a mule was looking. It couldn't be helped. Luck. Gap Rambo's luck. Might prevent the fellow from realizing what was happening. In the last resort, Gap had always relied upon that luck. Luck made his living and had saved his skin a dozen times. It never could desert him, totally.

His hand found the latch of the cabin and, for a moment, he steadied himself against the jamb of the door. Beneath the muck that was on his face, a whitish pallor had spread over his strong, almost handsome features; already his eyes were dark, sickly hollows. The once immaculate apparel that marked his taste for dress hung torn, disreputable, upon his lank frame.

Tom Taylor wouldn't care how he looked. Gap pushed in the door. Some one moved about inside. The light was poor.

"Oh, Rambo——"

Gap made out a fleeing face; half familiar, wholly unfriendly. "Where's Tom Taylor?"

The face came nearer. "Why, Gap, yore hurt. Step right in an' set down——" The voice was like honey.

Momentarily Gap hesitated. An ingratiating hand had him by the arm. He stumbled inside, sunk into a splot-bottomed hickory chair. "Where's Tom Tay——"

Too late to avoid it he saw, rather than felt, a blow with something heavy descending upon his uncovered head.

An overpowering darkness curtained his vision.

Water, cold and sweet, was held to his lips in a hollowed gourd. A splash of it was dashed in his face. Gap Rambo opened his eyes.

"Lyman Creech!"

The man walked with a stiff, halting motion across the puncheon floor and replaced the gourd in a bucket. When he turned his face was grim, filled with contemptuous satisfaction. Slowly, he came back across the room and let himself down stiffly into a chair facing Gap.

"That's me—Creech," he said with a rasp. "It's been some time since you seen me. They buried old Taylor last month, an' I bought his cabin. You see, Gap, I been up to the city tryin' to get my leg cured, but twarn't no use. The hip socket was plumb smashed. The doctors say the leg'll always be stiff—a cripple for life. That's yore doin's, Gap—that's whar you kicked me."

Creech's sallow features gathered a spasm of hatred. With an apparent effort he calmed himself. He was mostly a rack of bones; incredibly aged for a man of thirty.

Gap Rambo made an effort to rise; fell back as though in the clutch of a dozen grappling hands. The yellow teeth of Lyman Creech showed in a crooked, mirthless grin.

"No use, Mad Dog. I got you tied to the back of thet chair. Done it snug and purty arter I belted you on the head. You been unconscious more'n two hours, Gap, and what do you think? The sheriff's posse is all spread round the cabin. I reckon somebody must hev seen you come here and give the word."

A curse formed on Gap Rambo's ashen lips was checked. Lyman Creech chuckled slyly.

"That's funny, Gap—them fellers

holdin' off cause they're afraid to come up. They think you're hidin' at the winder with a gun. Lord, an' you as helpless as a kitten! An' them waitin' fer night to try a rush——"

Gap Rambo managed to catch and hold Creech's shifty eye with a steady stare.

"Creech, why don't you hand me over?"

"No hurry, Gap. They'll wait."

Gap's captor got up and moved with his stilted gait to the water pail. "Hev another drink, Gap? I want you should feel as well as you kin. 'Tain't no pleasure doin' business with a man what's half out of his head."

"Thanks, Creech."

Again Rambo drank deeply. Water was what he needed. Once more his intrinsic strength began to surge in his veins. The cool, gambler's brain began to fuction again, like a rusted instrument that receives lubrication.

In many respects the situation reminded him of a tight poker game. A steady nerve, the ability to think faster and further than an opponent.

"Creech, I'm ready to talk turkey," Gap said in a level voice. "What I say you can depend on. As long as I have been living I never broke my word to a single human being. I never will. I'm funny that way—but even you know that."

Creech nodded slowly. "Yes—you're thet kind of a fool, Mad Dog."

A flush stained Rambo's cheeks. "You wouldn't call me Mad Dog if my hands got loose!" His voice was thick. Instantly, he realized that he must control himself. By a supreme effort he forced back his anger. "I'm going to talk the only language you understand, Creech—money."

The crippled thin fingers drummed on the top of the pine table. "You had a hundred an' sixteen dollars in yore pocket, Gap. If you mean to talk about

thet you kin save yore breath. I already got it, and I'm goin' to keep it."

Rambo's face was impassive.

"That's only the first payment," he said. "I don't ask you to take a single risk. Just cut these ropes and hand me back my revolver that I see layin' on your table. I give you my word I won't harm you. Furthermore, inside of three months I'll send you a thousand dollars. I'll make my get-away and you can count on the money just the same as if it was in the bank. I can go up to Joplin an' pick that much up in maybe less than a month."

Lyman Creech limped over to a small square window; looked out silently. When he turned, his face was solid stone.

"I see three men settin' on the fence down by the road an' they got guns lengthwise acrost thar laps. One of 'em is Obe Carter, the best shot in Hickory County. Up back of the house Sheriff Lane and the Beasley boys is layin' in the brush. The chances air thet you'd never make it, Mad Dog."

"I'd make it on my luck alone, Creech, and you'd get your thousand in maybe a month's time."

Creech sucked in his breath with a hissing sound.

"A thousand dollars! You're talkin' like a tinhorn—a cheap skate. If I was to turn you loose I'd want anyhow ten thousand, and you'd be fool enough to keep yore promise if you made it. But let me tell you somethin', you tinhorn skunk——"

He paused and came forward until his face was within a foot of Gap Rambo's. Eyes that were live coal of living hatred burned with an unquenchable flame.

"Damn you! You couldn't git loose if you offered me fifty thousand. You busted me, Gap Rambo. You made a damn, limpin' freak outen me—you kicked me outen Eunice Mercer's yard

—you kicked me outen a fortune right thar an' a good woman besides. An' inter"—a derisive gesture embraced the disheveled cabin—"this. I been layin' fer you, Mad Dog, an' I got you!"

There was that in the eyes of Lyman Creech that told Gap, calmly, that any attempt at propitiation would be futile.

"I was countin' on your greed, Creech," he said frankly. "I might overreach myself tryin' to get ten thousand, but I'll promise five—inside of a year. Without my help that's more'n you'll ever get till your dyin' day."

His gambler's instinct told him that he had lost, even as he watched the flare of the battle of greed against revenge in the eyes of Lyman Creech. Mounting steadily, gaining dominance, was the fanatical glisten of the hot eye that bespoke the seething spirit. Revenge won and in its victory a chill fixity of purpose overspread the entire being of Lyman Creech.

"The Lord delivered you into my hands and, by God, you're mine. I never thought it could happen, so sweet. When I turn you over to the posse you'll linger in jail till they hang you. You're as good as convicted now. I heard the news myself an hour afore you turned up at my cabin.

"You'll be hung, but you'll linger in jail fer months. I got somethin' to show you, Rambo——"

From the bottom of a greasy cupboard Lyman Creech got out a small blunt hammer with a homemade helve of ash.

"Look at it, man. Thar ain't no pain on airth like a busted hip socket. You cain't sleep; thar ain't no peace on airth without drugs, an' you cain't git 'em in jail. You'll lay babblin' fer months on a lousy cot. You'll beg 'em to stretch yore neck. Rambo, I'm goin' to bust youre hip and turn you over to the law."

Gap lunged forward, strained in futility at his bonds. His lips were clenched between his teeth until they

bled. An eerie, cackling laugh broke from the narrow lips of Lyman Creech.

"God—if I could get my hands on you——"

"Thet's right, Mad Dog, rave! It's music to my ears. Thet's part of my pleasure. First you suffer in the mind an' then in the body. I won't crack you fer a while yit——"

Gap Rambo suddenly relaxed in his chair; mastered the passion that flamed in his being. Once more the face became a mask. It was a game. He was a gambler.

The run of luck is inconstant. If he lost, if he died in agony and degradation, it was—luck. There was little or nothing to regret in his past. He had ridden hard and fast. His hands had not been soiled by labor.

A free man he had roamed his native hills while his fellows had scrimped and struggled on a rugged, stony soil. His sure, deft fingers had supplied him with plenty of money from the zinc mines down in the big town, even up in a place as mammoth as St. Louis. He had known the joy of fighting and winning. "Gap Rambo can whip his weight in wild cats," men had said. He had been feared and respected, a roving scourge.

Something sharp cut at his heart. Eunice! There were two kinds of women in his life; slack, daubed women—and Eunice. The others were of the flesh; Eunice was of the spirit. When he thought of her it was as of a mellow, comforting light shining through some substance that was beautifully translucent.

The emotion, he told himself, was not love. It was an instinct; a magnetism. Love meant kisses, embraces. Gap Rambo just wanted to be in the presence of Eunice Mercer, that was all. Sleeping, he had often felt her presence; a glow, a light. Sometimes it frightened him; always he was attracted.

"Think it over." Creech's rickety

voice roused him. "Give your mind over to the misery what's a-comin'. Me, I'm goin' to set right here and enjoy myself lookin' at you."

Minutes dragged into hours; the sun sank in a forest of crimson and gold. From among the trees a fragrant breeze sprang cool and refreshing. Lyman Creech looked at an old silver watch.

"It ought to be dark inside of an hour or so. They'll come an' git you, Mad Dog. I reckon it's 'bout time——"

One thin hand reached out to the pine table; the emaciated fingers curved around the helms of the hammer. Steadily, Gap Rambo kept his eyes upon every movement of the other.

Creech was on his feet, advancing.

"What's that noise?"

The cripple grinned. "Nothin' to save you, Gap. It's only the boards squeakin' under my feet."

"You're a fool, Creech. There's some one at the door. Listen—*look!*"

From the inside both men saw the wooden latch lifted. Slowly, the door pushed open, an inch at a time. With an animal cry, Lyman Creech threw his body against the door, slammed it shut.

His voice rose to a shriek. "Keep out. Ye cain't cheat me! Wait five minutes—two minutes——"

Some one rapped on the oaken planks. A silence fell.

"It's Eunice Mercer. Let me in, please."

The hate, the distortion of anger that was upon the countenance of Lyman Creech began to dissolve into a cunning light. Watching him, Gap Rambo grew pale, tightened like steel through his long, well-knit frame.

"I might," Creech said softly, "as well make a complete job of it. Come in, Eunice."

With a jerk he threw the door wide open. The girl, without hesitation stepped in. Creech closed the door.

This time he slid the wooden shaft of the bolt.

Erect, as straight and supple as a young lily, Eunice Mercer stood in the center of the room. A shining mass of chestnut hair was gathered loosely on a smooth neck. Her features, finely cut, were curiously masklike; in her widening dark eyes was an expression of infinite quietness.

"I have come, Gap, to take you with me."

She was hatless, clad in blue gingham. That Gap Rambo was bound in a chair before her, that Lyman Creech lurked evilly at her side, affected her no more, apparently, than if she had been in a trance.

Lyman Creech put a trembling hand on her shoulder. "Set down, Eunice."

Slowly, the somber eyes turned upon him, fixed him. As though in response to some unspoken command the hand dropped from her shoulder. Creech took a backward step until he was against the table.

"Get up, Gap, and come with me."

The words choked up in his throat. "This ain't—no place for you—Eunice."

"He cain't git up and go with you, Eunice, 'cause I got him tied. He murdered yore father. He cain't move a step 'thout I say so." The man passed a tongue over dry lips. "Ner you nuther, Eunice. The two of you cain't do a blessed thing, only on my terms. You got to talk to me."

Neither heard the plainly spoken words of Lyman Creech.

"The sheriff sent you, Eunice——"

"They let me come because they knew that you'd shoot down any man that stepped in the clearing as long as there was daylight. They couldn't stop me. They said you had killed my father and——"

"You don't believe that?"

"No. But even if you had, I would have come just the same."

"To save me—to help me get away."

Gap Rambo shot a livid glance at Lyman Creech. "You dog! Did you think that you could stand up against a power like that?"

Eunice Mercer stood straight, with her arms at her side. When she spoke there was something mechanically inevitable in her tone.

"I came to save you, Gap, but not to help you get away. After this day you can never be the same again. Neither can I. It is the turning point, the end of our pasts. If I had not received this"—she touched her breast—"this light I would have died when I heard the news, when I saw his body. You must come with me, Gap, back to the men who are waiting for you—for me to bring you."

The high-pitched laugh of Lyman Creech picked up the end of her words. His hands outflung themselves in a gesture of exaltation.

"Why, Gap wouldn't do thet. He'd be a fool. Girl, no man loves a woman better than he does his life. No, sir. Gap, he's going to listen to me now, now when it's me thet's talkin' turkey. Gap's goin' to take his chance of gittin' away, scot free an' clear of bullets. Thar's a ravine back of the house. A scoot fer it arter dark—from the cellar door—eh, Gap?"

The poignancy of Lyman Creech's voice, strumming through the dense air of the cabin like some off-keyed note of a whining instrument, had caught and held the attention of both Gap and the girl.

"Look here, both of ye. I got you both, like thet—in my fist. Gap, I kin kill him if I like. I kin use you, Eunice, as I please. You-all an' me is a different breed of cattle. You're both soft, but ye don't know it.

"Now lissen. I know Gap Rambo an' the blood thet's in him. I'd take his word afore ary other man's on airth. Men, some of 'em, air built thet way. Water cain't run up hill. Thar's thet in his chest thet won't let him break his

solemn word. Ner you nuther, Eunice, 'cause you love Gap an' yore his slave, even if he don't know it.

"Look here. I'll set Gap free an' give him back his pistol an' mine, too. He goes free. It's the difference between life an' hangin'. He'll find plenty of other women in the cities, an' money an' fine clothes, too. Fer thet all I ask is his solemn promise an' yours, too, Eunice, thet you'll marry me; thet Gap won't ever interfere. I'll be good to you, girl. I'll double an' tribble the money what's been left to you——"

A violent shudder ran through the slender frame of Eunice Mercer. "Oh, Gap"—her voice was a sob—"I love you so, so much——"

"It's either thet," Creech broke in, "or hangin' an' a busted hip socket."

It was no time to smile, yet the face of Gap Rambo, despite its disfiguring stains, was shining with happiness.

"The thing you seem to overlook, Creech," he said smoothly, "is that for the last five minutes I've had my hands free. You tie knots like a woman."

He was on his feet, with the loose loops of ropes dropping to the floor.

"I reckon, Creech, I'll work on you fer a few minutes and throw what's left out of the window."

In a flash, Lyman Creech had reached for the weapon that was on the table. Rambo was quicker. Catlike, he was upon his man; had twisted an arm behind his back until a scream of pain broke from bloodless lips. One swift hand found Creech's own revolver in a hip pocket, removed it. Steel strength picked the owner of the cabin up and slammed him like a broken piece of furniture into a corner. Inert, softly sobbing, Lyman Creech lay where he fell.

"Eunice—with me, after dark—down the ravine——"

"With you anywhere, forever, Gap, if you make me. But it's wrong. It's

the turning point. We've got to stay here and face it."

Gap Rambo was like ice, old, solid.

"There's no nourishment in being hung or spending a lifetime in the penitentiary, at best. Out there we can have everything, each other."

"But how?" There was agony, bewilderment in her tone.

Gap smiled. She was a child. A mellow, innocent light shining through something beautiful, translucent——

"It'll be easy, honey. With my luck, my skill. I can handle a deck of cards like you can play the piano—yes, better, and you're the best player I ever heard."

She shook her head.

"You'll kill something in you and in me, too, if you go. Your father left you a farm. You could work it, honestly."

"Don't be a fool," Gap said quickly. "I'm as honest as the men who try to win *my* money. Work—that's for horses and engines—not for free men. Besides, I wouldn't get a chance to work the farm. I tell you a dozen people will swear they saw me fire that shot——"

She was silent. For the first time in his life, Gap Rambo missed something from Eunice Mercer. It was as though a light were dimming, were flickering out.

"You'll come with me——"

Her hands found a place on his shoulders.

"To the end of the world, Gap. But, I'm leaving my heart, my soul, back here in the hills where I was born, where you were born. The fine clothes——" Her voice faltered, broke: "The—other—women. I know they'll come."

Before his eyes she withered, began to sink. Gap caught her in his arms, held her as he would a child. Her lids fluttered, closed. "My heart—here—in our country—Gap——" It was no more than a whisper.

Appalling, as acute as ten thousand steel fingers clutching at his heart, was the pain, the sensation that he had killed something, that he had taken a life more precious than anything he had known before. In a moment of clarity it came to him that in saving his own life he would be taking from Eunice Mercer something of impalpable sacredness. In the great outside world he would be content, perhaps, but she—the mellow light would be extinguished forever.

"No man loves a girl better than his life."

Creech had said that. Creech, Gap Rambo suddenly realized, had lied. Very gently, he lowered Eunice into a chair.

"Look, honey——"

Deliberately Gap Rambo picked up his own weapon and that of Lyman Creech from the table. Breaking his own, he ejected the shells into his hand and poured them into her lap.

"It's the last loaded gun I'll ever carry, honey, no matter what happens."

With a snap, he broke Lyman Creech's revolver, noted, subconsciously, that it was a new make. There were five chambers. Only three shells fell out.

"You can carry this harmless artillery when we walk down to meet the sheriff, honey. Funny, Creech had steel bullets in his gun——"

"Steel bullets!" A shudder ran through the girl. "They said it was a steel bullet killed father. It—it fell right down in the road."

Gap Rambo closed his eyes for a moment; saw himself in a clean, spacious cabin on the greening side of a mountain. Eunice—his light—was there in the vision.

"I'll carry you down to the road, honey. And don't worry. I can prove who it was that tried to shoot me down for revenge, and killed your father."

*The Big Feature of the next issue:*

## "The Crater of Kala"

A complete novel of the  
South Seas

By

**J. ALLAN DUNN**





# The Wagon Wheel

by William Patterson White

On his way to see Charlie Shale, the Indian agent, about a government beef contract, Sile Thompson, of the Slash F outfit, is killed by two mysterious rustlers. When he fails to return, his partner, Bill Derr, sets out to investigate. Derr knows that the Hawkins crowd, and also Jim Ferret, are bidding on the contract, and he knows that Shale is a crook. "Pap" Hawkins and his three unsavory sons—Sim, Hank, and Thorn—are a quartet of choice scoundrels. "Mom," Pap's wife, a big, coarse, but good-hearted woman, lives in terror of her husband and sons—but occasionally she gets mad and tackles moonshine. With them lives Dolly Warren, presumably Pap's niece, an attractive, decent girl, high-tempered. She likes and comforts Mom, but has no use for the rest of the family. There is a mystery about three names, Sue Mundy, George McKee, and Shacken. Pap, in a towering rage, has threatened to kill anybody who ever mentions those names, and he has forbidden Dolly to play on her fiddle a tune, "Packington's Pound." Evidently this has something to do with Pap's past. Shale makes love to Dolly—who breaks a bowl of flour over his head and chases him. Pap is furious at her. He wants her to be "nice" to Shale on account of the desired beef contract. Searching for Sile, Derr comes to the Hawkins' place and meets Dolly—and sees Shale covered with flour. Shale says he hasn't seen Sile for weeks. Later Pap and his lovely sons visit Shale and make a proposition: They will force Dolly to marry him in return for all the beef contracts. Shale agrees, and brings out a bottle of moonshine to drink on the deal.

## CHAPTER VI.

WHEN they had had their drinks and were gone, the agent sat quietly in his chair for a while. And as he sat his sharp nose seemed to become blunter and his jowls more plendulous. His little close-set eyes glistened. The full red lips moistened shinily. They parted, revealing the strong yellow teeth. He uttered a sound, a growling sound, not pleasant to hear. Nor was the man pleasant to look upon. Indeed at the moment he resembled noth-

ing so much as a pig, and a beastly pig.

At last he got heavily to his feet and went to a corner cupboard and brought forth a bottle of Rohr McHenry. He possessed an educated palate, this tall, stout Indian agent, and for his personal delectation drank a brand of liquor he would not dream of offering to his acquaintances.

He tilted out a stiff drink of the private stock, sipped it delicately, savoring it with keen enjoyment. He put away the bottle and the glass, and

teetered back and forth on his heels. Again he smiled that toothful smile. He put out his open-fingered right hand. Slowly he brought the fingers to the palm, clenching the hand till the muscles in his wrist stood out. By the expression on his countenance he might have been squeezing something it gave him excessive pleasure to squeeze.

Hanging behind the door was his quirt. He slipped it off the hook and drew the double lash through his fingers with loving tenderness. He whirled it crosshanded and brought it down twice upon the table with all his strength. The double percussion sounded like revolver shots.

"Beat me, will you!" he gritted out, again cracking the unoffending wood with all his might. "I'll show you! I'll cut the hide off you! I'll make you crawl! You'll lick the soles of my boots before I'm through!"

Furiously he began to thrash the table top as though it were a mule—or a woman—he wished to subdue.

"Naughty table make you mad or somethin'?" a satirical voice broke in upon the song of the quirt.

Charlie Shale stood still as a stock, the quirt raised high. He turned his head. Leaning across the sill of an open side window was Mr. William Derr. Slowly the agent's arm fell at his side. "I was just seeing if this quirt was any good," was his totally inadequate explanation.

Instantly he bethought himself that there was no reason why he should explain his conduct to Bill Derr or any one else. He became stiff. Very much on his dignity he walked across the room and hung up the quirt.

"Come in if you want to," he said to Bill Derr.

"I'm all right here. I've been all over the reservation, Charlie, and none of the police or your feather-dusters have seen a sign of Sile. Seemingly he ain't been near the reservation."

Charlie Shale sat down. "Then that settles it. He couldn't have come here."

"You think so?"

"Good Lord, man, don't you think so yourself?"

"I'm asking you what you think?"

"I've already told you what I think. I——"

"Now listen, Charlie," Derr complained, "I've already told you what I think about your shouting at me this a way. You stop it."

"But how many times do you want me to tell you that I haven't seen Sile Thompson, that I haven't the slightest idea where he is, and that I don't believe he was ever within ten miles of the reservation? How many times——"

"I met the Hawkins outfit riding away from here," was Derr's apparently irrelevant interruption. "I suppose they landed the contract for the next issue?"

"What if they did?"

"Nothing, oh, nothing a-tall. Did I tell you it was about that particular contract Sile was coming to see you?"

"I don't think you mentioned it."

"He sure wanted that contract for us. Determined feller, sort of, Sile is. Hasty feller, too. It don't always pay to be hasty, does it, Charlie?"

"I don't know. I'm not hasty."

Derr regarded the agent with critical disfavor. "You're not. That's true. Do you believe Sile could have happened an accident, Charlie?"

"He might have."

"Hasty fellers do have accidents, don't they?"

"I don't know that they have more than any other kind of people."

"I'm glad you think so, Charlie. Your words are a comfort. Then you don't guess Sile had an accident?"

"I didn't say that. I don't know."

"But you do know you haven't seen him?"

"How many—Good God! man, of course I know I haven't seen him!"

"Well, all right. I just wanted to make sure. Seems funny nobody saw him after he left Marysville."

"He may not have taken the main road. There are short cuts."

"I know there are. But if he took a short cut he ought to have gotten here sooner than by coming the main road."

"Unless he stopped by the way."

"Or was stopped."

"Who'd stop him?"

"I don't know. I'm going to find out."

"Oh, I don't believe he was stopped by anybody. He didn't have any enemies, did he?"

"Hasty fellers always have enemies. Sile had enemies. Everybody has enemies. I'll bet even you have enemies, Charlie."

But this Charlie was not disposed to admit. "I guess I get along pretty well with most folks. Sile maybe had an accident, Bill. Horse might have thrown him and drug him. Such things take place every day. If it happened way off in the mountains, you might never find out what became of him. I wouldn't worry if I were you, Bill. Sile will turn up all right, you'll see."

"No, I won't worry. I won't worry a-tall, but if anybody else is mixed up in Sile's accident, this anybody else will worry. So long Charlie, so long."

Bill Derr turned from the window and was gone.

The agent went to the window and watched him mount his horse and ride away on the trail taken by the Hawkins outfit. "I hope he ties into them!" he muttered vindictively. "Damn his soul, that Bill Derr is too big for his pants!"

He went quickly to the cupboard and poured himself a drink that slopped the rim. And now, when he drank, it was noticeable that he sipped not at all. He gulped.

"But how are you gonna manage  
8BPEO

Thorn?" Hank asked the question that had been uppermost in his mind ever since leaving the presence of the agent.

"How am I gonna manage Thorn?" repeated Pap. "Which I ain't gonna manage Thorn."

Hank laughed unpleasantly. "Electing Sim and me, huh?"

Pap glanced askance at the silent Sim. "Sim knows better."

"You been talking it over with Sim and left me out, huh?" bumbled Hank resentfully.

"Can't you do anything besides 'huh' like a pig?" demanded the irritated Pap. "I ain't talked anything over with Sim. I didn't have to. Sim knew mighty well that I had some scheme or other for takin' care of Thorn. You didn't hear Sim asking any questions, did you?"

"Aw, lemme alone," grunted Hank. "You're always ridin' me, ridin' me. Anybody'd think——"

"Oh, for Gawd's sake, shut your trap! Anybody'd think you were a woman, hearing your tongue clack! When it comes to ridin' you, I dunno who rides you more than Thorn does."

Hank was understood to curse Thorn and all his works.

Pap smiled evilly. "You don't seem to like Thorn."

Hank swore again.

"I don't expect you'd feel bad if Thorn was to stub his toe and break a neck or somethin'," hazarded Pap.

"Watch me weep," snarled Hank.

"Thorn has been getting too widespread and new lately," said Sim softly.

"Spoken like my own Simmy," Pap approved cordially. "Funny how you and I think alike most always."

"When you two get through passing riddles——" began Hank.

"I guess I'll have to explain it to you in words of one syllable, Hank," Pap said kindly. "How would it be to let out Thorn?"

"Let him out? How you mean?"

"Easy enough. Thorn ain't going to take kindly to the idea of Shale marrying Dolly. He'll just about hit the ceiling."

"He'll kill Shale," said Hank.

"Unless Shale sees him first."

Sim nodded. "I thought that's how it would be."

"Yeah," smiled Pap, "that would fix things fine as frawg's hair—if Shale saw Thorn first, and we'd fix it so he would see Thorn first. Then we wouldn't have to give Thorn any three hundred dollars for permission—*permission*—here Pap spat with disgust—for the use of Dolly, and we wouldn't have to split profits four ways any more. Instead of two fifty apiece out of every thousand we'd get three thirty-three and a third. I guess that ain't to be sneezed at."

"We'll have to get Thorn out of the way till the joke is sprung," declared Hank. "Naturally, naturally. I've thought of that, too. We'll send Mister Thorn down to look over the ranches south of Damson and Blossom and see which ones are good for us to operate on. It's a long month's job even if he only half does the work right."

"But we know all about how the ranges run down there," objected Sim. "And Thorn knows we know it."

"Sure we know how the ranges run. It's the *outfits* I want Thorn to look over. Which ones are slack and which men ride with their cinches tight. We dunno a thing about them. So you see Mister Thorn will earn his keep for once."

"We'll have the time of our lives proving to Thorn we hadn't a hand in letting Shale have Dolly," Hank said uncomfortably.

"Don't you fret about that," comforted Pap. "But we'll have the time of our lives persuading Dolly to marry Shale!"

"Lo," said Pap Hawkins, stroking

his shirt and grizzled beard. "How's tricks, Jim?"

"Coming in bunches," replied Jim Ferret, a small individual with a short chin and worried eyes set far apart. "I can't complain."

"No," said Pap, eyeing Jim's comfortable ranch house, "I guess you can't. The kids all yours?"

"All of 'em," was the reply, "from that little towheaded tad, Johnny, playin' under the washbench to Ida May, fifteen-year-old and big for her age, who's in the kitchen helpin' her maw. Round dozen all told, I got, Pap, and every one living."

"Ain't lost a one, huh? You are lucky. Don't guess you'd wanna sell one, if the price was right?"

Jim Ferret perceived the pleasantry. He laughed. "Money wouldn't buy a one of 'em. I ain't got none too many. I like kids, I do."

"I guess you do," Pap assented musingly. "I guess you do."

"Light and rest your horse, Pap," invited the hospitable Jim.

"I'd like to, Jim, I'd like to, but the fact of the matter is I came over to see about your white-nose chestnut. I saw one of your girls riding him, and I guessed maybe he'd do for my niece Dolly to lope around on. Of course, he ain't much of a quadruped, so the price ought to be about right."

"Don't you fool yourself," Jim countered warmly. "Which that white-nose is a right good hoss. Strong pony, too, six-year-old, not a blemish on him or in him. He ain't got a trick. You can't make him kick. Drive him, too, single or double. Can't hitch him wrong. Nawsir. Why that cayuse is worth any two mules in the county."

"That's what they all say," sneered Pap. "I'll bet he's past mark of mouth."

"You talkin' business or to pass the time?"

"Business."

"Come along then, and I'll prove it to you. He's in the far corral."

So, Jim on foot and Pap riding, they made their way to the far corral, which corral was distant from the house at least a hundred yards. At the corral gate Pap dismounted and dropped the reins over his horse's head. Jim started to slip the gate-lever out of its wire loop.

"Wait a shake," said Pap, touching Jim's arm. "I can see him all right from here."

"You can't see his teeth all right from here," objected Jim.

"I was just fooling about his teeth. I'll take your word for it, Jim. Bank on your word any time. Everybody knows you. Let's sit down on the log and talk it over."

"Talk what over?"

"The price of the white-nose, what do you guess? Right handy having this log where it is. Can they see us from the kitchen?"

"Both windows on that side lookin' right at us. Ida May is workin' at the table by the right one now. I can see her, can't you?"

"Right plain. But she can't see me so plain, 'cause the log bein' end on, you're between me and the house."

"What's that got—"

"Lemme finish, Jim, lemme finish. You're slanchways to the kitchen all right, but you're facing that stand of timber yonder. How far would you say it was from here to the timber?"

"About fifty yards range."

Pap smote his knee with delight. "Fifty yards range," he says. "Fifty yards range." You never said a truer word in your life. It is fifty yards range."

"What are you talking about?" demanded his fellow sitter.

"Suppose a man happened to be lying over there behind a tree with a gun," continued Pap. "Just suppose, huh? Where would you be?"

Jim Ferret elected to perceive another

pleasantry. "For the matter of that where would you be?"

"Me? I'd be sittin' on this log. See that patch of brush between those two bullsaps. Fine place for a bushwhacker. You ain't got any enemies, Jim?"

"Let's go back to the house," said Jim, and made as if to rise.

Pap laid a detaining hand on his knee. "No hurry. Lookit."

Jim looked. In the palm of Pap's other hand snuggled a two-barreled deringer. Pap was not actually pointing the weapon at Jim. Still—

"Nice gun," remarked Pap. "Small, handy, efficient. You ain't wearin' your gun this morning, I notice."

"I wish I was," Jim declared fervently.

"Lucky you're not. You might get hot-headed, or somethin'. Don't pay, gettin' hot-headed. Life's too short. No sense in making it shorter. Besides, you owe something to your family. You seem to like those kids of yours. And I'll bet they like you, too. Miss you a lot, they would, likely, if—if anything happened. Look at that patch between the bullsaps, Jim. Ain't that a rifle barrel? Looks like it to me."

It was unmistakably a rifle barrel protruding from the brush between the two trees. Jim Ferret sat very still.

"If that Winchester yonder should go off," elaborated Pap, "there couldn't any blame attach to me. Here am I sitting alongside you. Whoever's workin' in the kitchen would see that, and they'd see the puff of smoke over against the brush between the bullsaps and they'd—see—you—lyin'—across—the—log. And right away they'd see me jump up, slide over behind the log and begin to shoot at the woods. Defending you, see—or what's left of you."

Jim Ferret stared into the hard black eyes of Pap Hawkins. There was no mercy in them. "What's all the shootin' for?" asked Jim.

"A little matter of business," explained

Pap. "You and Charlie Shale have made some kind of a deal together about the next gov'ment beef issue. I was counting on landing that contract my own self. Are you sure you want that contract?"

"I don't care a damn about it," Jim hastened to say.

"No hard feelings, I hope, Jim," pursued Pap.

"How you mean, no hard feelings?"

"I mean, no running around afterward and backing out of this bargain."

"I dunno what Charlie will say," muttered the dispirited James.

"Now don't you worry your head about Charlie," Pap advised him soothingly. "I'll attend to Charlie. You'll find he won't mind a bit giving the contract to me. But you haven't said you wouldn't back out of the bargain afterward."

"Suppose I do?"

"In that case, Jim, the first time you go to town you won't get there. If you think I'm fooling, gamble with me, and be sure when you're gambling with me that you ain't gambling with the welfare of your wife and children. Be sure, be very sure of that, Jim. Well, guess I'll be going. Sorry we can't agree about the price of the white-nose. Remember that the rifle in the underbrush will be watching you till I'm out of sight. I wouldn't move if I were you, for a while. Sit and rest yourself. You need it."

So saying Pap pocketed the derringer, stood up, and strode to his horse. Mounting he rode away unhurriedly. Jim remained as instructed on the log he sat upon till Pap dropped from sight behind a swell. Then he got to his stiff legs and walked slowly to the house.

Bill Derr, riding a barefooted horse, came to the Hawkins ranch and dismounted at the kitchen door. Mom, a big stirring spoon in her hand, came to the door.

"'Lo, Mis' Hawkins," said Derr, removing his hat.

"'Lo," returned Mom.

"The li'le horse cast both foreshoes. Can I tack on a couple over at the shop?"

"Sure. Help yourself. Shoe him all around if you like. If you need anything, holler."

"Thanks, I will," said Bill.

Bill Derr rode over to the blacksmith shop and dismounted. His eyes were very busy. He was looking for straws—the straws that show which way the wind blows. Hitherto he had discovered no sign of Sile Thompson or Sile Thompson's horse. He did not suspect any one in particular of having made away with Sile, but he suspected every one in general—that is every one in that region.

He made a fire in the forge, and rattled out shoes of the proper size without much difficulty. While he pulled the lever of the bellows his eyes mechanically roamed the blacksmith shop. They flitted over and came back to an almost new sideweight shoe with one heel longer than the other.

Derr immediately ceased blowing the bellows and picked up the shoe. He turned it over and over in his hands, examining it closely. There was a dead weight on his heart, and red vengeance in his brain, for the shoe was the near foreshoe of Sile Thompson's black horse. A blacksmith can always recognize his own work, and Derr himself had made this particular shoe for his partner's horse whose off fore interfered badly.

"And they said they hadn't seen Sile," he muttered.

He looked about for the other shoes of the set, Sile having been accustomed to shoe all around at one shoeing. But he found no other shoes.

He put away the sideweight shoe in a saddle pocket and went back to the forge

to heat his own shoes and think the matter out—if he could.

At the start there was one thing he could not understand. Why should Sile pull off a perfectly good shoe, especially such a shoe as this sideweight that was hard to make, and moreover fitted the hoof? For the shoe had been pulled off. No doubt of it. The nails were still in the nail holes and there was no indication that a single one of them had worked loose.

"They couldn't work loose," Derr said to himself. "My nails don't work loose."

Trampling of hoofs, jingle of spur rowels, creak of saddle-leather, a whiff of cigarette smoke—Pap Hawkins and two of his boys were riding past the blacksmith shop on their way to the corral. They called a greeting to Derr, and he returned it.

"I guess I'll be going up to the house after I'm through here and see what Pap has to say about it."

Realizing well enough that the Hawkins outfit might not confine their comments to words he felt at the back of his neck where a leather sheath containing a slim-handled heavy-bladed bowie knife was sewn inside the back of his vest. He loosened the knife in its sheath, pulled the shoulder holster under his armpit a trifle to the front, and made certain that the six-shooter hanging at his right leg could be swiftly drawn. There were three of the Hawkins bunch, perhaps four, should Thorn be at home, but he comforted himself with the thought that the hand is sometimes quicker than the eye.

He withdrew the shoe from the bed of coals. Cherry-red. He thrust it back into the fire, and looked about for the hammer. It was not leaning in its proper place against the anvil, nor was it anywhere in the immediate vicinity.

Then he saw the hammer. It was lying across the shop against the wall. Beside it was a pile of old sacks. He

strode impatiently to the hammer, stooped to pick it up and overbalanced himself. He fell on his hands on top of the sacks. Something clinked beneath those sacks. Derr, who, under the circumstances, was not disposed to leave anything open to conjecture if he could help it, tossed the sacks to one side and discovered a horse-hair bridle. He lifted it. The bit rings and rein-chains clinked. The bridle was the bridle of Sile Thompson.

A long moment he stared at it. Then he put it where he had found it and replaced the sacks very carefully.

"Have some more coffee?" Pap urged hospitably.

Derr refused and leaned back in his chair and took out the makings. Mom removed the coffeepot from the stove and went to the door to throw out the grounds. Dolly, standing at the stove, was stirring the contents of a saucepan.

"Don't often see you in this part of the country, Bill," remarked Pap Hawkins, thrusting a splinter of light wood into the stove.

"I have business up here sometimes," said Derr.

"You'd think there'd be enough business down around Seymour to keep a man busy." Thus Pap, bulling right along.

Derr leaned back in his chair, which brought Sim and Hank within range of his vision. With Pap getting personal like this it was just as well to have an eye on every male member of the family. Mom, too, for that matter. It was to be observed that Derr continued to roll his cigarette. This enabled him to keep his fingers close to the left lapel of his vest beneath which a six-shooter nestled in the shoulder holster.

Pap repeated his remark with emphasis.

Derr grinned. "You would think so, Pap. You would think so. But there isn't always. When times are slack a

feller has to pick up and scatter around where the business has gone to."

"Even then he doesn't always get the business," said Pap.

So Hawkins knew about the Slash F effort to land the beef contract, did he? And was consequently prone to gloat over the Slash F failure? Derr jumped right in with a splash.

"No, he doesn't always get the business," he drawled. "Take these gov'ment contracts now. Some folks get 'em and some don't."

Dolly's arm paused at full stretch. Then it went on slowly. Derr, his eyes on Pap's face, heard the spoon scrape against the side of the saucepan. None of the Hawkins lot said anything.

"Sile Thompson came up here to try and get that contract," continued Derr.

"Did he?" said Pap.

"Yeah," nodded Derr, and crossed his legs. The movement of his body brought his right hand a shade nearer the butt of his shoulder gun.

"Wouldn't Shale give him the contract either?" asked Pap.

Either? Was Pap crazy or what? Derr was watching Pap closely, but for the life of him he could tell nothing from Pap's expression.

"I don't know," said Derr.

Momentary surprise in the eyes of Pap. "I thought you said Sile Thompson went to see Charlie about it."

Derr shook his head. "I didn't say Sile Thompson went to see Charlie Shale. I said he came up here to try and get that contract, but——"

"You mean here—to this house?" interrupted Pap, not sharply, but as one desiring ordinary information.

Derr shook an impatient head. "I don't know where he came to. Naturally he was going to see Shale, but he didn't see Shale—according to Shale."

"Where'd he go?" This from Hank.

"I don't know, Hank," said Derr. "I wish I did. You fellers haven't seen anything of him, have you?"

"You took some time to ask that question," Pap said swiftly.

"You're taking some time to answer it," was the prompt come-back.

"I ain't seen him," Pap said shortly. "You boys seen anything of Sile Thompson?"

The boys said they hadn't.

"Satisfied now?" demanded Pap.

"I ain't complaining," said Derr.

"Alla same, you took a long time workin' up to your question. Why didn't you ask straight out in the beginning if you wanted to know had we seen Thompson?"

"I ask my questions in my own way," Derr told him calmly.

"Well, I don't like your way," Pap went on hardily. "I——"

"Put 'em up, boys." It was a voice from the doorway speaking.

Bill Derr put up his hands in company with the others. He recognized the voice of Top Sawyer, the sheriff of Fort Creek County.

"I ain't going to put up my paws for you or anybody else, Top Sawyer," declared Mom Hawkins, keeping right on with her stirring.

"Why, that's all right, Mom," the sheriff told her. "We ain't got a thing against you, not a thing. All we want to do is ask Pap and the boys some questions."

"Damn funny way you got of asking questions," remarked Pap, casting his eye about and observing that an armed man stood outside of each window, and that at least seven more were crowding at the sheriff's back. "I see you-all took off your spurs," he added.

"So you wouldn't hear us," explained the sheriff needlessly. "We didn't want to hurt anybody—if we could help it."

"That was right thoughtful of you." Pap's accent was bitter.

"Where's Thorn?"

"He went away last week—on business."

"He did, huh? Maybe we'll have to



make him prove it—when he comes back."

"Do you want to ask me some questions, too?" Derr inquired meekly.

"Yes," replied Sawyer, "and you can put your hands down. Not you, Pap! Sim and Hank, too! Keep 'em up till I get your guns! That'll do nicely, Pap. Turn around, Sim. That's the ticket. Hank, you seem to have hung yours up. Are you packin' a hideout? Lemme look. All right, you can put 'em down and sit down if you like."

"Thanks for the permission," snarled Pap. "If you wanna ask your infernal questions, fly at it."

"Pap," said the sheriff, "have you seen anything of Sile Thompson lately?"

"No, I haven't! I never saw such a bunch! Everybody comes and asks us where Sile Thompson is! Do you think we stole him?"

"Who else has been asking where Sile is?" asked the sheriff sharply. "Oh, him," he continued as Pap indicated Bill Derr. "He's got a right to. You two boys seen anything of Sile, huh?"

Both boys repeated their earlier denial.

"All right," said the sheriff. "We'll have to search the house, blacksmith shop, sheds and stable."

"Why? Do you think we've got Sile Thompson hid away somewheres?" Indignation on the part of Pap.

"You haven't got *Sile Thompson* hid here."

"Then what——"

"But you've got something belonging to Sile."

"Speakin' offhand you're a liar. And if I had a gun I'd show you."

"But you ain't got a gun, and we'll talk about the liar part of it when you have."

"What are you drivin' at, Top?" Derr put the question abruptly. "Give it a name."

"I found Sile Thompson's body early this morning."

Derr nodded, his face expressionless. "I figured it would be that way. He's been missing so long. Where'd you find him?"

"Back in the brush about a quarter-mile north of the forks of the reservation and Farewell roads."

"Why, it's all rocks there, and the damndest place to get to! You can't ride in."

"He didn't ride in, and he didn't walk in. He was dragged in. The body was covered with stones."

"Where is it now?"

"Right there. The coroner ain't seen it yet. You can't move it till he does."

"What were you doing in those rocks yourself?" Derr probed.

"I got a letter last night," replied the sheriff, "telling me where to look for Sile's body, and where to look for some of Sile's belongings."

"Got the letter with you?"

"It's in the safe at my office."

"Did the letter say what belongings?"

"It didn't say."

"Who wrote the letter?"

"I don't know. It wasn't signed. It wasn't even written really. It was all printed out."

"Printed out, huh?" Derr stared at the sheriff.

"Printed out. Yep."

"What did you do with Sile's watch and money?"

"No watch or money on him when we found him. There was part of his watch chain still in his buttonhole—the hook part and maybe four or five links."

"How long had Sile been dead?"

"Hard to say, three—four, maybe five days."

Derr nodded and turned away. His calm, almost stoical expression gave no intimation of the hot emotion that seethed and bubbled within him. Sile Thompson, his friend and partner, dead! He had expected it, in a way, and yet, now that his worst fears had been realized, the blow was almost as shrewd as

though it had been totally unforeseen. He saw again Sile as he rode out on his trip to Moon Creek with a "So long," tossed back over his shoulder. And now Sile would never ride home again. Nothing that he could do would bring Sile back. Nothing that he could do would ever outweigh the fact of Sile's death. He could not exact a fair and equal payment in the only terms he knew, that of human life, but he would do what he could. Yes, he would do what he could.

The sheriff came to him where he stood at a window, looking out. "Sure is luck finding you here to-day, Bill. Now you can traipse along with me and identify right away anything of Sile's we find and save us a lot of time, maybe."

"You're mighty sure of finding something," snarled the bitter-feeling Pap.

"I am sure," said the sheriff. "Tom, while we're busy here you can take Cal and Jack and Homer and search the blacksmith shop. Goldy, I wish you and Dick would take the prisoners outdoors. They'll be under foot here."

"Well," said Mom to Bill Derr, "I wondered what you came here for to-day besides shoes for your hoss, and now I know. Playin' the pup-dog for the sheriff, huh? You're the sort of snake that slimes round snoopin' at key-holes."

"I'm worse'n that, gimme a chance," he told her calmly.

"You and the sheriff are a fine pair," she pursued. "A fi-ine pair. You're — Well," she switched abruptly, as the sheriff stepped into the kitchen, "I hope you're satisfied now—tearin' the house all up. You didn't find anything suspicious, did you?"

The sheriff eyed her with complete disfavor. "We may yet. I ain't any too satisfied. We ain't searched the stable and sheds. I just sent some of the boys to do that."

But the boys found nothing. The sheriff was incredulous. "Did you search everything?" he demanded.

"Everything but a mow of hay."

"And you didn't search that?"

"Why for? It was a big mow."

"It's a true saying," grumbled the sheriff, "if you want a thing done right, do it yourself."

He stumped off to the stable, followed by some of his men. Derr sat down on the washbench and rolled a cigarette. Pap Hawkins and his two sons, under guard, were seated on the ground a few yards distant.

Within ten minutes Derr saw the sheriff issue from the stable dragging a saddle. "I'll bet you didn't half search the blacksmith shop either!" came faintly to his ears.

Sawyer strode to the blacksmith shop. He was in there at least fifteen minutes. When he came out he was carrying the hair bridle that Derr had found under the pile of old sacks.

The sheriff hurried back to the house and dumped the saddle and bridle on the ground between the washbench and the Hawkins outfit. Derr inhaled deeply. For the saddle too was that of his partner.

"You see that saddle and bridle, Pap," intoned the sheriff, who rather enjoyed the sound of his own voice, indicating the articles with a spatulate thumb. "I found the saddle hid under the hay in your stable, and I found the bridle hid under a pile of sacks in the blacksmith shop. Do they belong to you or any of your family? They don't, huh? You never saw 'em before, either, did you? I thought not. Do you know why they were hid away? You don't, huh? All right, I'll tell you. They were hid away because you or some of your outfit killed Sile Thompson. This is Sile Thompson's saddle and bridle. I'm sure I've seen him usin' em. I could almost swear to 'em."

"Almost ain't quite," sneered Pap.

"If I can't swear to 'em, here's his partner who can. Bill, take a look at that saddle and bridle, and tell us who they belong to."

Derr squatted down and made a pretense of examining the two articles. He stood up and faced the sheriff. "They ain't Sile's," he said with finality.

"What?" cried the sheriff.

"They ain't Sile Thompson's. Don't you guess I'd know the saddle and bridle of my own partner? The bridle is black and white like Sile's, but there's no yellow and red in it. Sile's had a few yellow and red hairs in the cheek pieces. And the saddle is plain unstamped leather like Sile's, same old Visalia tree and oxbow stirrups, too, but this here is a Frazier saddle by the stamp, and Sile's was made by Billy Bolander way down in Santa Fe. This ain't Sile's saddle or his bridle either."

## CHAPTER VII.

PAP HAWKINS glared around the family circle. "What I want to know is, why didn't Bill Derr identify that saddle?"

"You think that was Sile Thompson's saddle and bridle?" asked Hank.

"Sure they were," sneered Pap, with all an opinionated man's contempt for a dull mentality. "Any fool could see that."

"Then why didn't he identify 'em?" Hank asked bewilderedly.

"Didn't I say that's what I want to know? Why didn't he? Why didn't he? He ain't got any reason to be good friends with us, and on top of that and this killing Sile's saddle and bridle turn up on our place, and then Bill Derr don't recognize 'em! Never saw 'em before, no, not him, and he reels off a speech about Billy Bolander and Santa Fe and red and yellow hairs till the sheriff's case against us ain't got one leg to scratch another with, and Top has to turn us loose. Now why did Bill

do that, huh? What's he think it will get him?"

"I don't know," said Sim, "and I don't care. What interests me is who planted that saddle and bridle on our place."

"The same man who wrote the anonymous letter to the sheriff. Who else?"

Sim scratched his tousled head. "You may be right."

"I know I'm right. Who'd you guess would do a thing like that to us?"

"Jim Ferret?" hazarded Hank.

Pap shook his head. "Not him. He might bushwhack one of us to get square, but killin' Sile and throwing the blame on us is too roundabout. Besides, he didn't have anything against Sile."

"So far as you know," persisted Sim.

"So far as I know. But I don't think it was Jim. It don't look like his style somehow. We've got other enemies."

"We have," admitted Sim soberly.

"Whoever it was, the feller was an enemy of Sile's, too," said Hank.

"You think so?" Pap observed with sarcasm. "You think maybe he had a grudge against Sile, huh? Well, maybe you're right, Hank. Anyway, seeing as you're so jo-awful bright, make another throw and tell us who the feller is."

"Aw, quit ridin' me!" grunted Hank. "You're always ridin' me, ridin' me! I only said——"

"Never mind what you only said. We'll take your word for it. There ain't a one of us got any idea who killed Sile——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Sim. "How about Thorn?"

"Thorn?" repeated Pap.

"Thorn. This trick that has just been played on us and Sile is a good deal like the trick we're trying to turn for Thorn's benefit. Suppose now Thorn he wants to get rid of us. He's got brains—some. And this trick is about what he'd think of, too. Besides, he'd have it in for Sile, knowing that the

Slash F was trying to get that contract. Thorn was always a great boy for killing two birds with one stone."

Pap gnawed his nether lip. "If I thought Thorn did it, I'd——"

"Depend on it, he did it," struck in Hank. "He'd do anything, Thorn would. Regular he-devil."

Pap's expression cleared. "You're always jumping to conclusions," he told Hank. "We haven't a smidgin of proof against Thorn. Not a smidgin. I don't believe he'd do it."

"If we'd cold-deck him, why wouldn't he cold-deck us?" Sim asked shrewdly.

But Pap had taken his stand. "I don't think so. It was somebody else. Besides, Thorn has been gone too long."

"We don't know that either," persisted Sim. "We don't know when Sile Thompson was killed."

"I heard Bill Derr talking to the sheriff this afternoon," supplied Hank. "After he turned us loose, y'understand, and Top, he said Sile hadn't been dead more than five days when he found him. So that's that. It *could* have been Thorn. We don't *know* he went south."

"It's no use guessing any now," said Pap. "We got something more important than that to think about. Our li'le relative, Dolly. Yeah. How we gonna persuade her to do what we want, huh?"

"Damfino," said Hank frankly.

"She's stubborn as a mule," was Sim's contribution. "Short of kicking the pants off her, I don't know how you're going to swing her. I don't. No."

"And of course we don't want to hurt her," Pap said casually, his wicked old eyes gleaming at Sim.

"Sure not," assented Sim.

"I'd like to," said Hank. "She's the damndest, sassiest petticoat that ever gave a man back-slack. But you can't wallop her, even if she needs it. It would get around. Give us a bad name."

"You're devilish careful of our good name all of a sudden," Pap was incautious enough to sneer.

Sim gave his father a quick look. Pap caught it out of the corner of his eye, and veered like a windblown vane.

"You're a li'le hard on Dolly, Hank," said Pap. "She's a good girl, and does almost all the work. I don't know that she's any worse than any other female. They'll all jaw at you, for the matter of that. But we got to think of something."

Sim stared in wonder at Pap. Here was his father actually praising Dolly. He couldn't understand it. Pap perceived as much. So he leaned back in his chair and yawned with a great assumption of indifference.

"Well, we'll let it go for now," said Pap. "We'll think of something later. How about a short drink, boys?"

"Huh!" grunted Hank, sniffing suspiciously, "you've had several already, by the smell of your breath."

"Well, who's got a better right?" snapped back his father, a sudden smolder of wildfire in his eye.

"Where's the bottle, then? I didn't know you had any left."

"So you been snoopin', huh?"

"I just happened to look."

"Yeah, I know how you just happened to look. Yeah. I—— Aw, hell, whatsa use? I got three bottles hid out. I'll get 'em. Nemmine followin' me."

"He must have brought them back from town last time," offered Sim, when Pap was gone.

"Naturally," assented Hank.

"And last time was two weeks ago. He must have been saving 'em up for——"

"For what, I'd like to know?" interrupted Hank, suddenly starting off with a rush. "It ain't like our Pap to be so generous with his redevye. Most likely he wants us to do something for him. Well, you can gamble, if he expects me to do something for him in exchange for a measly drink of corn liquor, he's got another guess."

Sim said nothing. Hank was always

talking, always had a grievance. Frequently comment was not worth while.

Pap returned with a bottle in each hand and clanked them down on the table top. Hank squinted quizzically. "I thought you said you had three."

"They're quart bottles," Pap said equably. "But if two ain't enough, I'll get the third."

"Ain't enough," repeated Sim. "Ain't enough for what?"

"For a session," Pap answered with a disarming smile. "But I guess two will do us. We don't want to get too pie-eyed."

He fetched glasses, and pulled the cork of the first bottle with his teeth. He filled the glasses all around. "Drink hearty, boys," he said, lifting his glass. His stiff beard twitched as he swilled down the strong liquor. The wildfire in his eyes glowed a little brighter. He smiled expansively and struck the table with the heel of a heavy hand.

Sim, over the rim of his glass, regarded him with frank curiosity. He recognized the signs. Something was on Pap's mind. What? But he did not long continue to wonder. The liquor was too good and too handy for a fellow to waste time speculating on the answer to a futile question. Neither Sim nor Hank noticed that Pap, while he continued to shove about the bottle, was not drinking any more. It must be remembered that Pap was a little drunk to start with.

"I don't know how we're going to bring Dolly to our way of thinking," said Pap suddenly.

"Me neither," Hank chimed in. "Pass the bottle, Pap."

Sim made no comment. Pap bent a sly eye upon Sim. "She'll have to be made," proffered Pap Hawkins.

"She'll have to agree," said Sim.

"Even if we have to wallop her, by Gawd!" declared Pap.

"Wallop her——"

"Why not? What's a licking? Ain't

she my niece? Ain't I her uncle and guardian? I guess I got a right to whang her if she refuses to do what I say. You bet I have. Aw, don't be so nasty-nice about it, Sim. She's only a damn girl."

"That's just it. She——"

"Rats! What's the dif? Look what it means to us! Just look! S'pose now we don't get those contracts. What then? A fine mess we'll be in! A fi-ne mess! I tell you, there's no other wagon track out. Dolly has got to do what we say. Here, have another. Fill up. Don't be afraid of it."

Sim and Hank both filled. The liquor already in them was doing its work. The sense and sensibilities of both were dulled. Pap was right. It was necessary that Dolly be amenable to their plans. If she should prove contumacious, so much the worse for her. Exactly.

They had another on the strength of it. It did not make them drunk—this last drink. But it made them utterly careless of consequences. Pap thought he perceived as much. He leaned forward across the table.

"Listen——" he began.

The door opened. Dolly entered.

Pap turned in his chair with a hearty curse. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"My fiddle!" she flung back tartly. "I left it in here last night."

The fiddle and the bow were lying on a chair in the corner of the room. Pap, quick as a cat, had them in his hands before the girl was halfway across the room.

"I'm sick of you and your fiddle!" he bellowed. "This is the last time you'll leave it here or anywhere else."

So saying, Pap whirled up the fiddle and brought it down smash on a chair back. He dropped the shattered instrument on the floor, and snapped the bow across his knee.

"There," he said, kicking the splintery

remains with a contemptuous toe, "take your fiddle."

For a long minute Dolly did not move. Her eyes, wide open, staring, were fixed on her uncle's face. She did not speak. Then, abruptly, she stooped, gathered the broken bits of wood in her apron and left the room.

"You hadn't ought to have done that," said Sim when the door was closed.

"She hadn't ought to have interrupted," replied Pap, and swore again. "I'll teach her to mind her own business. Listen here——" and Pap slipped into his chair and began to buzz.

"What happened the day Charlie Shale was here?" Thus Pap Hawkins, giving his wife a basilisk stare.

"What happened? How you mean—what happened?"

"You know what I mean! What did Dolly do to make Shale mad?"

"Oh, nothing, Pap. What makes you think she did something?"

"Oh, nothing, Pap," says you," mimicked Pap. "Nothing a-tall. Well, Mis' Innocence, what did she do?"

"I told you, nothing," persisted Mom.

"I know you told me nothing, and you better tell me something or I'll give you something you ain't had for a long, long time."

"She didn't do anything to Shale." Mom insisted hardily.

Pap made a long arm, seized Mom by the wrist and dragged her toward him. "You're taking her part, that's what you're doing. Do you want a licking?"

"No, I don't want a licking, but I can't tell you any different about Dolly. You can peel my hide off if you like, and I'll only tell you I don't know that Dolly did anything to make Shale mad."

Pap looked from Mom to the quirt hanging from the antlers. Plainly he was of two minds as to the advisability of beating Mom. Then he flung her wrist from him.

"Mom," said he, "get you a fish pole

and go down to the creek and catch a mess of fish."

"I got too much to do around the house," objected Mom.

"Never mind what you got to do. Dolly will do it for you same as usual. Go and fish."

"But——"

"Go on!"

Mom continued to stand her ground. She saw that Pap was not quite sober. His breath was rank with the odor of whisky. "What you going to do to Dolly?" she demanded.

It was then that Sim entered the kitchen. He stood teetering on his heels in the doorway and grinned wickedly at his mother.

"What am I going to do to Dolly?" laughed Pap. "What a question! I ain't gonna do a thing to her."

Mom took instant alarm. "You ain't gonna touch that girl!" she cried.

"Who says I ain't?"

"I do!"

"Oh, you do, do you? And who are you, I'd like to know?"

Mom swallowed hard. Obviously she was frightened to death. Yet she braced up to her lord and master. "You ain't gonna hurt her."

"Aw, who's going to hurt her?" squalled Pap. "You've been drinking again. You're imagining things. I wouldn't hurt that Dolly girl for quite a lot. Take my word for it. Now you go and get that mess of fish."

"I won't! I'm going to stay right here. You're up to something, I know that or you wouldn't be afraid to let me stay here. You—you're drunk—all three of you. You been tanking up for the last hour. I saw you fetchin' in those two bottles. I——"

"Better go, Mom," cut in Sim. "You can come back in about three hours."

Mom gulped. "Three hours! Then you are going to do something to her!" Her voice rose to a shriek. "Dolly! Dolly! Run, run! They're after you!"

Pap laughed aloud. "You poor flap! Dolly's over in the blacksmith shop with Hank—and the door shut. She can't hear a word, and if she could, what good would it do? Hadn't thought of that, huh? No, I guess not. Run along now, and catch that mess of fish."

Mom realized that she was beaten, and beaten before she even started. "I'll go," she mumbled, "but if you hurt that little girl, Pap Hawkins, you'll regret it to your dying day! If Thorn was here——"

"Aw, stop your croaking, and sift along!"

When Pap and Sim had seen Mom well on her way to the creek, they went to the blacksmith shop, from which place was issuing the merry clangor of hammer and anvil. Entering they found Hank shaping a horseshoe, and a very sullen Dolly blowing the bellows. In the forge fire a second horseshoe was heating.

"Didn't I hear Mom yell a while back, Sim?" Dolly asked, completely ignoring Pap.

"Guess not. We've been right there with her till she just now went fishing. She ain't hardly said a word."

"I thought I heard her yelling, but I wasn't sure, and Hank said he didn't hear anything. He wouldn't stop hammering so I could listen, though. I could have sworn I heard her voice."

"Your mistake, Dolly," said Sim, rolling shut the heavy door of the blacksmith shop.

"For Heaven's sake, Sim," cried Dolly crossly, "do you want to roast us? Lord, I'm dripping now."

She stopped pulling the lever of the bellows and wiped her perspiring face. "I don't see why you couldn't help Hank, Sim," she continued sulkily. "Haven't I got enough to do in the house without piling a blacksmith's helper's job on top of me? I'm not twins, and Hank's half drunk besides. Yes, you are, too, drunk! Think I can't tell! You've got

a breath like a distillery, and you don't know what you're doing. Look at you right this minute! You poor sot! Where's the sense in hammering that shoe *now*? You've lost the heat. Put it in the fire and take the other shoe."

"I guess I won't need that other shoe right away," said Hank, laying down the tongs and hammer and plunging his forearms into the cooling tub.

"Don't be so finicky, Hank," Pap said impatiently.

"Lemme wash my hands, will you? Think I want to get my sleeves all dirty? There ain't any rush about this."

"Do you want to burn up the shoe in the fire?" snapped Dolly, failing to comprehend the trend of the conversation.

"Never mind the shoe in the fire," said Pap. "Listen here, Dolly. I've got a proposition to make to you. How would you like to marry Charlie Shale?"

"No more than I would Thorn, you old beast!" was the prompt reply, accompanied by a glare of frank disgust.

"It would help us a lot if you'd marry Shale."

"It wouldn't help me any."

"We'd take it as a favor."

Dolly folded her arms and squarely faced Pap. "I won't marry him. That's flat."

"What's the use of fooling with her?" demanded Hank, wiping his arms dry on his trouser legs. "Coaxing won't work."

"I know it won't, but I want to give her every chance. Always be as easy with the ladies as you can, is my motto. Then nothing I can say will make you change your mind, Dolly?"

"Nothing," declared Dolly.

"Grab her, Hank."

Hank obeyed by jamming his knee into the small of her back and pinioning her arms. At which there was a hurricane of growls in a far corner of the shop, and Dolly's dog, which had been dozing on a pile of sacks, flew at Hank.

He fastened on Hank's leg. Hank swore and kicked.

"Pull him off!" roared Hank. "Pull him off! He's biting right through!"

It was Pap who responded by plucking up a length of strap iron and bringing it down full sweep across the little dog's back. Feller, his spine fractured, lost his hold and fell away. But only for an instant. The brindle body was broken, but the stout Scotch heart was not. It was as full as ever of fury against the man who had laid hands on the beloved mistress. Snarling weakly, trailing his useless hindquarters, suffering the most exquisite torture, the devoted little dog dug in his forepaws and dragged himself anew to the attack.

Dolly had not seen the blow that smashed her pet's back, but now when she saw him in his helpless agony as Hank kicked him in the ribs and drove him six feet she shrieked terribly.

Pap completed the wretched work by nipping up the dog by the hind legs and flailing him smack against the horn of the anvil. With a most hellish grin that bared his teeth to the gums, Pap pitched the pitiful dead thing that had been Dolly's dog upon the very pile of sacks where he had been sleeping not two minutes before.

"First your fiddle, then your dog. You're next," said Pap Hawkins.

The truly horrific sight of the killing of her dog had held her spellbound. But as if Pap's words had been an electric current she was galvanized into life—and the most violent kind of life.

Lithe as a wild cat, and considerably stronger, she twisted her back sidewise, snapped her body forward and downward and threw Hank over her head. His clutching hands were torn loose as he flew through the air, struck Pap below the knees and threw him heavily. Dolly instantly whipped up the hammer and flung it at Sim. The latter ducked. The hammer crashed against the logs at the far end of the shop. Dolly sprang

to the window opposite the door. She was halfway through it before Pap, who had scrambled to his feet with amazing quickness, seized her by the ankles. She kicked him in the chest and sent him staggering backward. But she couldn't break his hold, and he pulled her backward with him, so that she fell on her hands and knees amid the old iron of the smithy.

Then Sim was upon her and whipped her right arm behind her back, twisting it till she had to clench her teeth to keep from groaning.

"Drag her up on her feet!" directed Pap. "We'll show this young lady who's boss around here! We—ugh!"

The grunt was wrung from the depths of his being by one of the young lady's heels which had kicked him in the pit of the stomach. Pap gave ground temporarily.

"You're a fine pair!" jeered Sim. "It's a good thing for you two, I'm here, or she'd be stuffing you both into the fire and burning you up. What's the matter, Hank? Feeling sick, huh? Pap, you look kind of green."

"She—kicked—me—in—the—stomach," Pap explained jerkily. "Be—all—right—in—a—minute."

"Lemme go!" panted Dolly. "Lemme go!"

"Will you promise to marry Shale?" asked Sim, twisting her arm a little. "You'd better be quiet. You'll only hurt yourself twisting and jerking this a way. If you kick me again I'll twist your arm off."

She did kick him again, and he did twist her arm—twisted it till the tears ran down her cheeks, and she really believed that she would faint with the pain. Yet no cry escaped her.

Her brain was curiously active. What would they do to her? Why didn't Hank change his shirt once in a while? He'd worn the one he had on two weeks at least. She wished Sim had shaved that morning. She could



feel his stubby chin on the back of her neck. What queer eyes Pap had. They seemed to smolder as they glared at her. There was a button missing from his shirt. His hair hung over his ears more than it should. It looked as if it had never been combed. Probably it hadn't. Not in the last few years anyway. What a beast he was! Yet he had seemed kindly enough when he took her to live with him. You never could tell. No, you certainly couldn't. What were they going to do with her? If Sim twisted her arm a sixteenth of an inch more, she'd scream. She knew she would. Or faint. Probably the latter. Her stomach felt queer, and strings of black spots danced before her eyes. Hank was getting up. He was rubbing his head and swearing at her.

"All ready?" said Pap. "Yonder's the rope, hanging on that nail."

Did they intend to hang her? Was that it? No, that wasn't it. But it was something only a degree milder.

At one end of the blacksmith shop stood the rear axle of a freight wagon, complete with its two heavy wheels, all that was left of a wagon that had been struck by lightning. The three men dragged the girl to one of the wheels, spread-eagled her facing the wheel and made fast her wrists and ankles with the rope.

"You still refusing to marry Shale?" inquired Pap.

"I won't marry him!" she declared in a strangled voice.

From a nail on the wall Pap took down a one-team mule whip, which, be it known, is shorter than the two-and-three-team whips, but quite long enough to fulfill the purpose Pap had in mind. The man took his stand behind and to the left of Dolly.

The girl, squirming her head around to the left saw what he held in his right hand. She saw him draw back his right arm and swing it forward. The whip sang through the air. She closed her

eyes and jammed her forehead against the felloe of the wheel. Then she felt the most hideous pain she had ever felt in all her life. The shock of it almost stopped the beating of her heart. Again Pap's right arm drew back and swung. Again the whip bit into her soft flesh. Again she felt as though she were about to die. From the stripes across her back the furious, burning smart spread up and down her whole body. But she continued to hold her head hard down against the felloe.

A third time Pap brought down the whip across her back.

Dolly shivered all over. Her head fell back. Her body sagged. It was only kept from falling by her two wrists bound to the felloe of the wheel.

"She's fainted," said Hank.

Dolly opened her eyes. She had not fainted. Dully she beheld the face of Hank peering into her own. Her cousin, Hank, who was helping Pap to beat her. Her head rolled to the left. There was her other cousin, Sim. Sim, who had done her more than one kindness in the past, before—before this happened. Suddenly she realized with a clarity of vision that amazed her, that this was the turning-point of her life. It could not be a bare quarter of an hour since that she had blown the bellows for Hank. Yet it was a long, long while ago. She was not the same girl either, and never would be. Aside from the terrific pain she felt both physically and mentally different. Pap's whip, while it had taken away from her something that could never be put back, had not swung the pendulum one way only. It had given her something, too. It had given her hitherto purposeless existence a purpose. Pap came to her side. His subconscious mind must have read some hint of that purpose in her eyes, for he jerked up his head involuntarily.

"Afraid she'll bite you?" gibed Sim.

Pap cursed him. Then: "Dolly, have you changed your mind yet?"

Silence on her part while her eyes stared sidewise into his.

He put the question in a different form. "Will you marry Shale?"

She shook her head slightly.

"If you won't promise I'm going to whale you till you do," said he.

She knew he would, yet she shook her head a second time.

"Gag her!" cried Pap savagely.

It was done, and Pap began to lay on the whip with all his might.

"Not in the same place!" corrected Sim angrily. "You cut her too deep and she won't heal up in two weeks."

"Close your trap!" snarled Pap. "I know my business."

"She's fainted this time all right!" declared Hank.

His infuriated father paid no attention. He continued to thrash Dolly's unconscious body till the door burst open and a fat whirlwind blew in and fastened two hands on his right arm.

"Pap! Pap!" screamed the anguished Mom. "Beat me if you gotta beat somebody! Beat me! But leave Dolly alone! Oh, leave her alone! Don't hit her again! Don't! Oh! you've killed her! You've killed her! I know it!"

"Aw, shut up!" he bellowed at Mom. "She ain't hurt! She's only shamming! Leggo, I tell you! Go fix her up if you want to. Tie her loose, Sim. Help him, Hank! Don't stand there like a thumb-suckin' bump on a log!"

Derr, squatting on his heels, stared down at the body of his friend, Sile Thompson. The coroner and his jury had not yet arrived. Nate Main and 'Hap' Green, the sheriff's deputies, were keeping Derr company. Derr's face was inscrutable. It might have been cut out of hard rock. But the eyes were as bright and alert as those of a bobcat.

When Derr spoke his voice was monotonous and gentle, almost soft. "This just the way he was found, Nate?"

"Except for the rocks we took off him," replied the deputy.

"He ain't been dead as long as the sheriff said," declared Derr.

"I don't think he has myself," spoke Hap Green. "Two days at the outside. Top, he didn't make allowance for the weather."

Derr fingered the broken watch chain. It was an old-fashioned watch chain with a hook instead of the more usual button-hole bar. It was obvious that a sudden wrench had snapped the worn links.

Nate leaned forward to look over his shoulder. Derr said to the deputy, "The links are pretty well worn thin. It wouldn't take much of a yank to bust 'em."

"The holdup must have been in a hurry," Nate offered as his opinion.

"Whoever dragged him in here had time enough to cover him up with rocks," said Derr, glancing at the two-foot heap of stones beside the body. "If he didn't have to hustle he didn't have to break the chain. He'd have unhooked it."

"But it is busted."

"It is busted. How come?"

"I'll never tell you. Second sight is something I don't own to."

"Find the answer to why this watch chain is busted instead of unhooked and you'll go a long way toward dumping the murderer. In a deal like this it's the unnatural happenings you want to look into most. The things that don't fit, see?"

"What do you think?"

"He wasn't robbed. That's a cinch."

"But his money and watch are gone."

"Didn't I just tell you that the killer had plenty of time—time enough anyway. There's a good ounce of gold in this hook and these few links. If Sile had been robbed the hook and links would be missing, too."

Nate subsided. Such reasoning was beyond his powers. He watched Derr peel down the dead man's shirt and un-

dershirt. On the white skin were long, discolored abrasions.

"See those rope marks," pointed out Derr. "He was packed to the edge of the rocks on a horse. Why didn't you say so before, Nate?"

"I never saw the rope marks before," defended Nate. "Neither did Top, or any of us. We saw he was cashed and let it go at that. Me, I ain't undressin' any dead folks if I can help it. I—where you goin'?"

"See if I can track the pack horse!" Derr tossed back over his shoulder.

Derr, the man hunter, slipped and slid across the tumbled rocks and boulders and tore his way through crackling brush to the edge of the stony patch. Here he began to quarter the ground like a hunting dog. The deputies followed, but they were not the trailers for such a delicate job as this.

"Stay back on the rocks," he bade them. "If you come walking around you'll blot the trail."

The patch was over two acres in area. Consequently there was a deal of ground for Derr to cover. He might be compelled almost to encircle the patch before he struck a mark. That he would strike a trail he was almost certain. For a led horse presaged another horse. He said as much to the deputies.

"Maybe he packed him in front of his saddle," suggested Hap Green.

"In that case he'd have held him on, and where would the ropes come in? There are two horses anyway. Hap. It's the horses we have to depend on. The ground is too hard for human footmarks, but a horse's hoofs will nick it enough to make a showing. Especially if they're shod."

A spreading shadow absorbed his own shadow and fled on across the face of the land. He looked up at the sky. Torn, greasy, gray shreds of storm-scud were streaming ahead of a rapidly advancing storm cloud. Nothing could have been more unchancy. Even as he

looked a lightning flash ripped across the black heart of the dusky mass of cumulo-stratus. The thunder crashed, and with it crashed his hopes.

A raindrop smacked his cheek.

Within thirty seconds it was pouring.

"No use," said Derr, rejoining the deputies and crowding in with them under an inadequate slicker spread over their heads. "Five minutes of this would wash out a wagon track."

"This is sure a fright," commented Hap Green. "It only rained four days ago."

Two rains within a week in that country are almost as remarkable as Siamese twins or a six-legged calf. It frequently does not rain twice during the whole of the summer.

When the very elements seem to go out of their way to fight against you, you are vastly out of luck. Nor is there anything more maddening to the average mortal man. He is so helpless, poor, puny person. But Derr had hunted too many men to be in the least discouraged by the setback. Fate had dealt him a poor hand this round, that was all. The next time perhaps the cards would run better. If not the next time, then the time after that.

## CHAPTER VIII.

BILL DERR blew into Marysville at the tail of a three-day southerly wind-storm. He had heard that a horse thief languished in the Marysville calaboose; said horse thief, who bestrode a most excellent unbranded black, having been sufficiently ill-advised to run off seven head of Bar S stock. It was Derr's intention to have a look at the horse thief's personal mount. The horse Sile Thompson rode to his death was an unbranded black.

On his arrival he discovered that the Marysville citizens, their tempers run ragged by the three-day storm, had lynched the horse thief and turned over

the black horse together with the seven Bar S horses, to the Bar S punchers. The black horse was by this time somewhere on the Lazy River range.

Derr decided to give his tired mount a few hours rest and went to pass the time of day with his friend, Tom Cooper, the town marshal. The latter was sitting hunched up on the steps of the calaboose. He appeared unhappy. Strewn about like spillikins were split and splintered planks of what had been a strong jail door. Immediately the marshal began to pour a stream of woe into Derr's right ear.

"Which I don't mind their stretching the feller," the town marshal said in part, "but they needn't have used a wagon tongue on the calaboose door. They knew mighty well I'd let 'em take the keys any time to lynch a horse thief. But did they even think of askin' me? Not them. They had to act violent and bust the door all to kindlings. Look at it! Just look at it! Nothing but the lock set!"

"Boys will be boys," observed Derr, rolling a philosophic cigarette.

"But they needn't be thoughtless boys," said the marshal. "Now like as not I'll have to pay for that door, besides takin' the prisoner home with me, and then my wife will raise hell. She's so refined, Eliza is. Don't like to have criminals round the house. Nawsir."

"Prisoner, huh? Thought that horse thief was the only one."

"No, there's another. Boy he is. Tried to get away when they drug out the horse thief, but he ran right past my house while I was sitting on the front step. Yeah. Stick your head in the doorway. You can see him over in the corner."

Derr obeyed. Dimly he saw in one corner of the musty calaboose a slight figure huddled. The knees were drawn up, the hands were finger-locked round them. The shining eyes set in the dirty young face stared at him defiantly. The

boy wore a coat. Derr wondered why. It was a blazing hot day outdoors. And the one-story-and-no-attic jail was an oven.

"He's only a kid," said Derr, withdrawing his head and easing himself down on the step beside the marshal. "What's he done?"

"Tried to beat the stage company out of a ride to the railroad. Didn't have any money, he told the Farewell agent, but he was going to meet his brother at Blossom, brother being a mining engineer. Which last was a little too thin, because if there's any mines round Blossom I don't know 'em. But that Farewell agent always was a fool. Anyway, he let the kid ride, and gave Highpockets orders to collect from brother. Well, Highpockets, he caught the kid skipping out not a mile from here, so Highpockets tied him up prompt and brought him along and turned him over to me when he pulled in. Of course there ain't any brother at Blossom. Not a smidgin of one."

"There might be a brother," said Derr. "You can't tell."

"Oh, there ain't, that's a cinch," declared the marshal.

"It's none of your business anyway!" The voice of the prisoner snapped raggedly. Derr marked the hysterical note and wondered, for the average wayfarer in the West is not given to a display of nerves. A certain tone of the voice struck him as familiar. He wondered at that, too.

"Got a temper," said the marshal. "And I'll have to take it home with me till the door's fixed. Being a marshal is no job for a married man. Nawsir."

"Had a hearing yet?"

"Not till this afternoon. Judge Windus played draw till sunrise, so there wasn't any court this morning. Lost three hundred to the Indian agent, I heard."

"Is he in town?"

The marshal nodded. "Pushing his

stomach ahead of him all over the place. Huh? Oh, sure. He sifts in for a drunk and other relaxation most regular. How about a li'lle food, Bill? You're eating with me and the prisoner."

"Sure," acquiesced Derr indifferently.

The marshal slapped his knees and stood up. "C'mon, kid," he said to the one within.

"I don't want anything to eat," declared the prisoner.

"You'll feel different when the grub's in front of you," the marshal told him good-humoredly. "You c'mon."

"I'll stay here."

"I can't let you do that," said the marshal wearily. "I'm responsible for you, and I have to go home to eat. So you just naturally got to come with me. Ain't he a pup?" the marshal added to Derr. "Contrary! Worse'n a woman. If he wasn't so skinnylike I'd kick the pants off him good and plenty."

The marshal entered the jail and laid hands on the skinny one's collar and shook him upright. "You gonna be sensible, or will I drag you?"

Derr looked at the prisoner dispassionately. It was none of his business how the Marysville marshal ruled his guests. But if it were himself now—well, sir, he'd take the stubbornness out of the kid in short order. He didn't believe in coddling prisoners. Not he. While he gazed the marshal without waiting for a reply to his question began to propel the prisoner toward the door. The boy held back. He staged a feeble attempt at a struggle. This the marshal easily defeated by jerking the prisoner's left wrist behind the back and bending the forearm upward. The boy winced. He was now close to the door. Derr saw his dark blue eyes bright with unshed tears. There was no defiance in those eyes. But there was terror—terror and something more pitiful, a poignant grief that was obvious even to the hard-bitten Derr.

"Cry baby," said Derr to himself, and at the same time felt, unaccountably enough, sorry for the youngster. "Can't be more than seventeen or eighteen," he thought, and got up to make room.

The owner of the dance hall and one of her girls were passing by. They stopped to look. The prisoner stumbling over the sill caught their stares. "I'll be good," he told the marshal in a low tone.

The marshal nodded and released the imprisoned wrist. "You'd better," he drawled grimly, retaining his grasp on the other's collar. "Come round to the front while I put the cuffs on you."

The prisoner's body stiffened. He stopped short. The dance-hall girls were still staring. The discouraged shoulders slumped forward. Without protest he allowed the marshal to shove him round the jail and into the front room where the marshal kept his handcuffs, notices of rewards, and other odds and ends connected with his office.

A moment later the two emerged, the prisoner wearing the handcuffs. "You don't have to hold me now, do you?" queried the prisoner in a flat, dead monotone. The prisoner had apparently fought down his hysteria. Derr began to feel more comfortable. He had been fearful that the fellow would publicly burst into tears.

"I guess you're safe now," said the marshal, his hand dropping. "Right across the street."

"Nice lookin', kind of," the dance-hall girl observed in a perfectly audible tone as the prisoner and the marshal crossed the slatted sidewalk.

"Ye-es," admitted the owner, a line of puzzlement between her handsome eyebrows, as she gazed after the two.

"Don't look much like a dead beat," went on the first woman. "But you never can tell. I've seen them you'd think butter wouldn't melt in their mouths and if the truth was known—"

shucks! Jail's too good for 'em. Come along, Dora."

Dora came along, but turned her head for another look at the prisoner. The dawdling Derr, who wished to give the marshal's wife ample time to blow off steam before he appeared, wondered vaguely at Dora's unusual display of interest. "Maybe she thinks she knows him," he thought, and for the time being the matter fled his mind.

The marshal nudged his prisoner with a comforting elbow. "Eat up, eat up. I took the cuffs off you, didn't I? What more do you want?"

"I ain't hungry." Thus the boy sullenly.

"And a good thing, too," spoke up the marshal's shrew of a wife, clattering stove lids. "If there's one thing makes me sicker than mustard and water it's cookin' for a criminal, and a dirty, gormed-up criminal at that! Why didn't you wash your face when you washed your hands?"

The prisoner's blue eyes glinted dangerously. His fingers curved talonwise. Derr, spading sugar into his third cup of coffee, was beginning to find points of interest in this prisoner. For the latter was undoubtedly an odd number. Why should he cease making a row as soon as he saw himself observed by two dance-hall girls. Whether one of the dance-hall girls was a friend or not? Why didn't he eat something? In spite of the shrew's tongue sauce with which the food was served, it was undeniably excellent. Which excellence, by the way, was unusual in that time and place.

The marshal proffered the makings. "Have a smoke," he urged.

But the boy would not, shaking a decided head. Another oddity, thought Derr. The boy put up a hand to the side of his head, drew the hand back as if shot and glanced sharply at the marshal's wife who happened to be looking out of the window. A look of re-

lief vied with the sorrow in the blue eyes. The eyes slid round to Derr and caught him staring. Instantly the relief was displaced by fear, rampant fear. Another point of interest. Derr sat back in his chair and inspected, for a space, the ceiling. When he dropped his eyes the prisoner was still watching him furtively. Certainly there was something familiar about the grimy features of the boy even as there was about his voice.

Derr purposely began to stare. The red hair, too, was familiar. But not the haircut. It was a wretched haircut. Apparently the barber had employed sheep shears. The eyebrows, perfect crescents, were dark, almost black. Odd combination, red hair and dark eyebrows. Where was it that he had seen such a combination? It was recently, he was positive. And as Derr spurred his memory the answer to the puzzle began to shape itself in the back of his mind.

"Cheer up, cheer up," entreated the marshal, whose full stomach made him feel at peace with the world. "I don't believe the judge will give you more'n thirty days."

"Then you'll get that jail door fixed prompt and soon," snapped the marshal's wife. "If you think I'm gonna cook three meals a day for thirty days, ninety meals, count 'em, you mush-face, for any criminal, you got another guess. Go get that door fixed by to-morrow noon, or I'll lean a frying pan against your ear. You hear me whistling?"

"No call to get het, 'Liza," soothed the marshal. "We've got to do the best we can, that's all, and——"

"You get that door fixed *to-night!*"

"You said to-morrow noon."

"I changed my mind."

"But——"

"If I have to change my mind again, I'll change your features at the same time!"

"Let's go," said the marshal, plucking the prisoner by the sleeve.

They went, but not in any sense as the marshal intended.

The prisoner slid lithely to his feet and struck the marshal under the chin with the heel of his hand. The marshal, half in and half out of his chair, was caught off balance and went over with a crash. Before the marshal hit the floor the prisoner was jackknifing over the window sill. The marshal's wife, sufficiently annoyed as she was with her husband, was not one to stand by quietly while he was mishandled. She flung the frying pan. It was good line, but over. The frying pan smashed through both the upper and lower sashes, showered the shoulders of the fleeing prisoner with broken glass, and came to rest in the dust of the street.

Derr, who had sprung to his feet, hurled himself through the window a short length behind the prisoner. He was in good time to see the prisoner dash plump into the arms of the Indian agent, Charlie Shale. Which tall and yellow-faced citizen uttered a whoof of surprise and threw both arms round the prisoner. This was pure instinct and done solely to save himself from falling.

"Lemme go!" cried the prisoner.

"Why—uh—how!" stuttered Shale, surprise wrinkling his forehead. "What the——"

"Hold him! Hold him!" screeched the incensed marshal, scrambling through the window and dragging out his gun.

Derr, in the middle of the sidewalk, said nothing. Instead he watched the Indian agent with a cold and calculating eye. He swore under his breath as the prisoner began a furious struggle with the agent. For, the latter, at first loosening his grasp, had tightened it at the marshal's screech. The prisoner, uttering a moan of rage, kicked the agent's shins, clawed the side of his neck and bit his arm severely. The agent

let go with an oath. The prisoner dodged under his elbow. Derr, with great presence of mind, sprang in front of the marshal and masked his artillery. The prisoner sped round the corner of the house. Derr, the agent and the marshal sped after him.

Rage lent wings to the feet of the marshal and the agent, but it was Derr who caught the prisoner as he ran behind the back of the marshal's corral.

"You little fool!" Derr whispered, panting, holding the other's wrists. "You keep quiet and I'll get you out of this somehow! Stop it! Do you want 'em to find out?"

The prisoner desisted from the vain struggle. "I—I think Shale knows."

"Shut up!" Thus Derr, the two others coming up at this juncture.

The marshal reached for the prisoner. Derr, as though by accident, swung in front of the prisoner. The Indian agent seized the marshal's arm. "No unnecessary roughness, Tom," he advised in a genial tone utterly at variance with his sharp-looking eyes. "Treat him gently. This feller looks sick to me."

"Sick!" squalled the marshal. "Sick! You'd think he was sick if he lammed you under the chin the way he did me! Sick! If I'm never any sicker than he is I'll live forever! Sick! I'll make him sick!" And he reached again for the prisoner.

"Calm yourself, calm yourself," said Derr, holding the prisoner behind him. "You're a li'le excited, that's all. You'll feel better after a while."

"Bill's right," agreed the agent. "You listen to me. No violence. Absolutely not. You know what the law says about every man being supposed innocent till he's proved guilty. For all you know this feller may be innocent as the babe unborn. Shall a man's constitutional rights be taken from him? By Gawd, no! You go slow, Tom. You go very slow. I shall hold you person-

ally answerable for any injury suffered by this person."

"If there's anything left after I get through with you," Derr struck in softly.

"Say, what is this?" demanded the marshal, stunned and bewildered by the flare of oratory. "This ain't the Fourth of July. Why for all the speeches? I didn't steal the chickens. All this fuss and feathers over a common prisoner! Anybody would think he was your brother, Charlie."

"Every man," said Charlie, throwing a chest, "is my brother. I believe in the Golden Rule. Do unto others—you know."

"And do 'em first," paraphrased the marshal. "Yes, I know. I also know you, Charlie. When you go round swelled up like a poisoned pup shouting you're every man's brother and standing up with Bill here for a prisoner which ought to have the pants kicked off him, there's some skulduggery. I ain't a complete fool."

"You're mistaken," said the agent, fending off the marshal with both hands. "You are a complete fool, especially when you try to see more than an inch beyond your nose. There's that agency warehouse contract your brother and you want. I'd certainly be sorry if anything should come up to keep you from getting it. I would indeed. And you'd be sorrier, I expect."

"Well," grumbled the marshal, sulkily giving ground, "you needn't think you can bribe me," he added.

"Certainly not," denied the agent, his tongue in his cheek. "I wouldn't think of such a thing. I just happened to mention the contract in passing. Of course, the kind of treatment you accord the prisoner will be prompted by your own soft and generous heart. Now that we understand each other, let's take the prisoner over to Judge Windus and settle the thing. Quick! here comes a crowd."

So, hastily, the four of them bustled

round the corral, skipped in between two stables and doubled back past another corral. While the crowd, led by the marshal's wife, was searching one of the two stables the four arrived unpursued at the house of Judge Windus.

The latter was eating his breakfast. There was a wet towel wrapped turbanwise round his head, and the meal consisted solely of coffee. The session of the night before must have been warm and spirituous.

"Come in," invited Judge Windus, regarding them with a bilious eye. "Don't stand blocking the doorway. Come in and shut the door. Gawd A'mighty! No need to slam the thing! I got a headache. And what do you want, Charlie? The other dime? Who's this behind you? What did you bring him here for, Tom? I told you I wouldn't sentence him till this afternoon."

"Quite right," said the agent, taking it upon himself to reply. "It's afternoon now."

"I meant this afternoon at the courthouse," rowed the judge, sloshing the coffee round in his cup. "What did you bring him here for, Tom, I asked you?"

"Tom brought him here at my suggestion," inserted the agent, focusing the full power of his best smile on the judge. "I thought it would save trouble. Why go to all the bother of convening court in the courthouse when you can settle the job at home? You see my point? Yes. As I was saying, the prisoner——"

"What in so-and-so and such-and-such have you got to do with the prisoner?" the amazed judge demanded. "And why are you so anxious to save me trouble?"

"I am sorry for this poor, misguided boy," explained the agent, with a tremolo in his voice and an outflung hand toward the prisoner. "My heart bleeds for one in his situation."



"Well, don't cry about it," remarked the judge. "At least not here. What's the prisoner to you?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He is simply a fellow man in distress. I intend to help him if I may. To relieve the unfortunate, to succor the helpless, has ever been my aim in life."

"With the accent on the sucker," the judge said brutally. "I know you backward and sidewise, Charlie, old-timer. What's the li'le game?"

"The long and short of it is that I'd like you to fine the prisoner here and now instead of waiting till later."

"Why?"

"As a favor to me."

"As a favor to you, huh? Why as a favor to you?"

Again the broad and beaming display of teeth. "A whim of mine, if you will. Perhaps an opportunity to perform in a small way an act of kindness to the poor and needy."

"Not so much of your poor and needy," complained the prisoner. "I'm no beggar."

"Perhaps you have the money to pay your fine?" suggested the judge.

"Nun-no," was the faltering reply. "I haven't a nickel."

"You hear, Charlie? Says he hasn't a nickel. I'll have to make his sentence twice as long."

"What?" cried the prisoner.

"Don't you bark at me, young feller!" the judge admonished the prisoner. "You heard what I said. If I hear you beef about it I'm likely to give it to you twice as heavy again. That's me, Judge Windus."

"I was hoping you'd make it a fine only, judge," the agent spoke up swiftly. "You and I have always been old friends. You aren't bearing malice over what happened last night, are you?"

"Surely not," denied the judge. "Not at all. What's three hundred dollars to me? Nothing, absolutely nothing. But if I should make it a fine who'll pay it?"

"I will," Derr and the agent announced simultaneously.

"There seems to be a difference of opinion," purred the judge, his bad old eye lightening. "Very well, not as a favor to Mr. Shale, but because of my own slight indisposition I will hold court here. Marshal, I appoint you clerk pro tem. Pen and ink's yonder. Use that pad. The court will come to order. Prisoner, have you counsel? No, you haven't counsel. I will appoint Arthur Green as your attorney."

"But Green ain't here," protested the marshal, looking round in bewildered fashion.

The judge made a gesture of annoyance that crashed a tumbler to the floor. "Never mind. Write that I appointed Green counsel for the prisoner. It's merely a matter of form, merely a matter of form. Where is the plaintiff? Skidmore appearing for the plaintiff. Now don't start asking where Skidmore is, Tom. Prisoner at the bar, you are charged with petit larceny, disorderly conduct, and a breach of the peace, in that you did feloniously, unlawfully, and designedly attempt to defraud the Crocker Stage Company in the sum of sixteen dollars and eighty cents. Which sum is the cost of one trip between Farewell and Blossom. That you did not complete the trip is immaterial. Do you plead guilty or not guilty? You plead guilty. *I said you plead guilty!* Shut up! How dare you contradict the court! *Shut up!* Or I'll commit you! The prisoner pleads guilty. Accordingly you are fined one hundred dollars on the charge of petit larceny, one hundred dollars on the charge of disorderly conduct, and one hundred dollars on the charge of breach of the peace. Three hundred dollars is the total. Correct me, Mr. Shale, if I am wrong."

Here the judge grinned toothfully upon the Indian agent. Shale looked rather blue. So did Derr. The latter

carried precisely seventy-eight dollars and sixty cents in his leather poke. Three hundred dollars was ridiculous. Derr thought so and the agent said so.

"It is, huh?" snorted the bilious judge. "Where's your milk of human kindness now? Where's your bleeding heart et cetera? Where's your suckering aim in life, huh? I don't know what your game is, Charlie, but it will cost you three hundred bucks to sit in."

"This is outrageous. This is rank robbery." But Charlie made these assertions without any hope that they would be heeded. He knew he was beaten.

"Gimme time to go borrow some money from Judge Allison," said Derr. "I'll pay the fine."

"You, too," purred Judge Windus. "Couldn't think of it, Bill. Not for a blessed minute. Far be it from me to deprive our generous friend Mr. Shale

of an opportunity to relieve the distressed and unfortunate. Far be it. To be able to go through life sowing good deeds, storing up as it were, treasures in Heaven, is as great a privilege as it is an edifying spectacle. Three hundred slivers, Charlie, of the root of all evil."

"You old robber!" exclaimed Shale. "And you call yourself a friend of mine!"

"Always, Charlie, always. Perhaps you'd rather that I increase the amount of the fine."

"Not necessarily," Shale said hastily, driving his hand into the inner pocket of his vest. "I cave. I want to apologize, too. I'd never believed you were any great shakes of a business man, judge. But I take it all back. You are. You're a wonder. A he-wonder with pink stripes. Three hundred, I think you said. Ten, thirty, fifty, seventy, eighty——"

TO BE CONTINUED.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

## "THE MOUTHPIECE"

A remarkable story by

DAYTON STODDART

— ALSO —

"No Savvy!"

By

MILES OVERHOLT

"The High Hand"

By

H. KEITH TRASK



# Out of Uniform!

by Arthur Lockwood

Author of "The Wages of Gin," "The Seagoing Lady," etc.

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IS IT GOOD FOR A SAILOR TO RUN A STREET CAR? AND SHOULDN'T A SAILOR KEEP OUT OF THE WET? . . . . .

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THE glamour and romance of being a street-car motorman was suffering intense extinction in the mind of William Cutherton. The first thrills of feeling this jangling contraption move when he pulled a lever, had gone long since. Even the delight of riding on a thing that didn't have to be steered only lasted a short time after he got out of the navy. He had been formerly a quartermaster in our sea establishment and an inhuman officer of the deck had let him stand most of his watches at the wheel.

A month had elapsed, and this occupation that once loomed rosy in his dreams was now dull and monotonous drudgery. The navy that he had cursed and sworn to have nothing more to do with, wasn't such a terrible place after all. He recalled his oath to eschew all devices that needed steering; but he was actually wishing he was back on ship-board even if he had to stand six-hour watches at the wheel. For one thing, one wasn't continually having nervous prostration for fear of knocking over

a traffic cop; neither did he have to get out and get under if a fuse blew.

The root of William's troubles might as well be gotten at quickly; he had never been the same since Magda had stretched his aorta by showing a decided preference for Marks, that coxswain in the naval militia. The pill wouldn't have made him swell up and burst emotionally, if that naval militia fulminant hadn't been in it. Of all things on earth he couldn't digest, the naval militia was worst. And then to have a measly coxswain in such an amateur outfit come along and garner the preferences of the girl you've been trying to work into a marriageable state for weeks!

William's language, when he thought about these iniquities, was the uttermost in realism.

Why didn't William quit his job and reënlist? He was going to get his bonus for shipping over and would undoubtedly be rated a chief petty officer? Wouldn't he, though! Would he hesitate a hundredth part of a second under

normal circumstances? Wouldn't he dash into the first recruiting office and sign up without condition?

He would *if it wasn't for leaving that coxswain with a clear field.*

It happened that the route over which he daily labored was the Twenty-third Street crosstown line. Near Madison Avenue on this thoroughfare is the largest naval recruiting office in New York. William looked at it wistfully every time he passed; sometimes he had to fight the impulse to chuck everything and ship over.

But his desire to prevent any naval militia triumph prevailed, and he continued his unhappy task, in the hope that better things were to come. Of course it was the uniform this sap wore that intrigued Magda—William had perspicacity enough to see that after the first few times she had treated him with indifference. He tried to counter by telling her of his own naval experience. He would never forget her skepticism.

"I never did like a liar," she had said, fixing upon him a withering look. "You're just jealous of Mr. Marks, who really has the cutest suit—I sometimes wish I was a man—I guess if you ever had a uniform you'd be wearing it up here every night."

"I will wear it——"

Magda was horrified.

"William Cutherton!" she had exclaimed. "If you come around here in any fake uniform I'll have you arrested for impersonating an off'cer. I know you—you're a motorman—always was and always will be a slacker what's jealous of heroes."

Then and there had begun their quarrel. Calling Marks a hero was more than William could stand. The conclusion of the set-to had left no doubt of Magda's meaning; Mr. William Cutherton was to call there never again.

He had gone away seven thousand per cent less inclined to continue his ca-

reer as a motorman, but some instinct bade him hang on. He did, though the task was infinitely more hateful because the drudgery was garnished with perpetual thoughts about his troubles.

One night after another almost interminable day in transit, William was on his way to his boarding house in the outskirts of Brooklyn. There was a heavy downpour of rain, and even though he sought overspreading trees and dodged from shelter to shelter, he was wet through. There was a shorter route home than the one he was taking. He knew why he didn't take the other. Even in a hurricane he would have followed this one that led past Magda's house.

"A fine fool I am," he muttered. "She won't have nothin' to do with me and still I'd get soakin' wet jest to pass her house thinkin' I might get a look at her."

He cared nothing about the little stream of water that trickled from the peak of his cap down his face. His hopes were high that he might get a fleeting glimpse of Magda through a window. He shuddered as he contemplated the possibility of seeing her in the arms of Marks. In such an event, it was fairly certain he would continue right on to the ocean and dive in.

He walked on. The rain gave no sign of letting up, it was dark, almost black. Suddenly a figure came into view, that of a man walking ahead of him. He peered at it, making out the dim outlines of an umbrella as it came closer. Further scrutiny and he saw the familiar outline of a pair of sailor's trousers.

William spoke before he thought, an old instinct prompting him.

"Hey, sailor!" he called.

The man ahead paused, and turned about.

"You know you're outa uniform with that umbrella? Guess you ain't been in the navy long, eh?"

"Huh?" grunted the fellow. "What d'ye mean, outa uniform?"

"You'll go down fer a chute if anybody sees ye," said William. He was close to the man now—it was Marks!

Marks on his way to see Magda! William looked him over, uniform and all, and had a heroic struggle to overcome an impulse to let him have a handful of fist. It was such a nice, lonely spot.

Marks scowled at him, recognition all too apparent in his face, but he slowly lowered the umbrella, and walked away, leaving William in the throes of unmitigated self-reproach.

"Damn fool, me!" he growled. "Whyenell didn't I look 'fore I leaped? Doin' that sap a favor. If I'd only recognized him, I'd 'a' said nothin' and mebbe he'd a got into a jam. But I hadda go an' teach him somethin'. Good night!"

Not only was he drenched through, but he was the picture of despair when he arrived at his room half an hour later. Fredson, his roommate and a fellow motorman, greeted him cordially, but it had no effect.

"Whadye do, fall 'n the river?" asked Fredson, surveying the dripping William.

"Naw," grunted William taciturnly.

Fredson picked up a paper.

"D'ye see what happened to Jones, poor guy? He got five years fer manslaughter to-day."

William showed the faintest gleam of interest at this.

Motormen had been interested in the trial of Jones, who had collided with an automobile, resulting in the death of the driver.

"Poor devil," echoed William. "And then they say bein' a motorman ain't a hazardous occupation. Say, one day we're workin' fourteen hours fer practically nothin' and the next we're goin' to jail fer somethin' we

couldn't help. And ye git no pay for for time ye serve, either; it's a hell of a world. That fella Jones is a martyr! Yes, sir, a martyr, by hickey! An' the worst part of it is, the same thing is likely to happen to one of us any day!"

Fredson agreed. In awed tones they discussed the shortcomings of the motorman's profession. Plainly, the thing they dreaded most, was that almost inevitable day when they would hit something.

"Sure," said Fredson, "even if you should be lucky enough not to hurt anybody, ye'd be fired. An' all because some damn fool thinks car tracks is put there fer æsthetic purposes."

Up in the back room of a gin mill in the San Juan Hill district, Mr. Marks was feeling vengeful. It had all happened because he had let Cutherton make a fool out of him. It had been a ruse he was sure, with himself as the unsuspecting victim. If only he hadn't put that umbrella down, none of those exceedingly unhappy events would have followed.

The thoughts Mr. Marks was indulging were unpoetic in the extreme. He wanted gore; and wanted it to spurt with prolonged and reëchoing gurgles from the carcass of one W. Cutherton. He did not regret his failure to wallop Cutherton the night before, Mr. Marks was not of a disposition to fight man to man. In that locality where he had been raised, it was the system to knife them in the back, or attack in gangs. That admitted of the maximum amount of safety to one's self, a condition that Marks enthusiastically preferred.

But for the purposes of constructive revenge, Mr. Marks had gathered about him half a dozen more or less young men who were famous for their utter lack of scruples. There were three burglars, a highwayman and two pickpockets. They listened with interest to Mr.

Marks, the reason being they had just been blithely healed, and there had been specious promises of more when the job was done.

"Now," said Mr. Marks, "this boid Cutherton is a motorman on the Twenty-third Street line, see? I've investigated and loined that he'll 'rive at the East Side end o' the line about one-thoity to-morra afternoon. 'S all very simple, gents, all ye gotta do is be on hand and help me beat 'im up."

There was one dissenting voice, that of a burglar.

"Phew!" he exclaimed in inspired contempt. "Ye need six men to beat up one poor guy? Ye kin count me out."

"Gimme back my money then," whined Marks.

"Ha-ha-ha," laughed the burglar. "I must say you are funny, even if you are yella. The idear o' you askin' me for that money back when you know how sudden you might git bumped off if you got to insistin' too hard. Ha-ha-ha!"

Mr. Marks leaped lightly from the subject, and addressed the others. They, however, were agreed in the project. Certainly it was an easy way to pick up a little extra money, Marks having stipulated that he only wanted Cutherton beat up.

"Try an' stick a coupla black eyes on him," instructed Marks. "Ye see, I wanta tell this goil I beat him up alone, see, an' I want him to look the part. Git me?"

They "got" him and promised to be there. One raised the question of how much more they were to get. Marks was prodigal in his promises.

It was noontime in the great open spaces of the Twenty-third Street line. A street car slowly wended its weary way eastward; its driver, one Cutherton, being wearier. He had negotiated Broadway after a series of exaspera-

tions, and had stopped at Madison Avenue. Passengers got aboard.

It would be well now to take one last, hopeless look at Cutherton who was on his way to doom in the form of one finished and painstaking beating. A few blocks distant, five journeymen gangsters, entirely capable of their task awaited Cutherton. Judging by the way he argued with passengers and growled to himself, was blissfully unaware of this awaiting business. He was due for surprises in bunches.

That scowl with which he regarded the world, was soon going to undergo impressionistic treatment—and coloring.

Two bells sounded, and he yanked his levers. It would seem that he wanted to hurry to his fate. The fact was, he was two minutes behind his schedule, and he was anxious to make it up. He would have sped the block between Madison and Fourth Avenues, if he could have. Not even would he have looked up at the recruiting station, the flag of which beckoned over the sidewalk. He had forgotten for once the mockery in the legend:

"Men wanted for the navy. See the world and learn a trade."

Another sign was occupying his attention; it read: "I. Guldenstein, Meats," and was emblazoned on the rear of a delivery wagon that was proceeding tranquilly along the tracks ahead. The beast that drew it, and the one that drove it were magnificently unheeding of the bell which Cutherton was clanging constantly. It was a good way to give vent to anger, so Cutherton clanged more and louder. The wagon made no move to get out of the tracks.

Finally the motorman could control himself no longer. Opening his front window and leaning out he yelled:

"Hey, you blankety blank! By the Holy Jumped Up!!!!!! Git outa my way!"

This language evidently functioned, for slowly the wagon began to swerve to one side. Cutherton was desperate, again he yanked those levers, giving all possible speed to the car. He was sure there would be at least three inches of room for him to pass—ample in the estimation of a motorman. He let her go.

Crash! Creak! Thud!

He looked down and saw the left rear wheel of Mr. Guldenstein's property crumple and the wagon settle on the hub, a wreck. He slammed on the air, bringing the car to a stop with such suddenness that he nearly went through the front window.

This was really too much. He looked back to see if he had unhorsed any passengers. He hadn't; much to his regret. The driver of the wagon had jumped down from the seat and was yelling all manner of remonstrance, anathema, invective, and what not.

Cutherton was surveying the damage. A crowd was gathering on the sidewalk. He looked out over it wondering what next to do, when that recruiting flag waved into his line of vision. It was like a red rag to a bull. The course of action became clear as crystal.

William Cutherton, erstwhile motorman, then and there calmly removed his cap and meticulously placed it on a seat. Off came his uniform coat next, and this he folded tenderly and placed beside the cap. From an inside pocket he calmly took some papers, glanced at them as though to reassure himself, and then stepped down to the pavement. He walked to the sidewalk and up the stairs to the recruiting office.

Would they enlist him?

The officer in charge looked at his papers. Well, rather—and they'd make him a chief quartermaster.

"Ye haven't got a extra suit I kin put on around here, have ye?" asked Bill of the yeoman who made out his reenlistment papers.

"Sure," said the yeoman. "Oh, say, and where do ye prefer duty?"

"Anywhere," replied William.

The yeoman made the entry on his record.

It took a great deal of maneuvering on Magda's part to finally accomplish the meeting with Cutherton. She persisted in spite of his letter, his telephone message and his telegrams to the effect that he was "off women for life." She waited at the navy-yard gate one night and met him as he was coming ashore on liberty.

"Honest, William, I'm sorry," she pleaded.

William was obdurate.

"That don't make no difference. If I married you, you'be callin' me a liar 'fore our honeymoon was over."

"William!" Her eyes were glowing in admiration.

Bill felt a thrill as he looked at her—prettier than ever. She was bewitching. "An' whatye gonna do when they come that way?" he reasoned.

"William, do you really think I could call anybody what wore such lovely clothes a liar? William, do you?"

"Er—well—ah—mebbe not," said William. And now he simply had to cave in. He did so with abandon. He didn't care if she called him fifty liars! They were seated over bowls of chop suey, when he finally mustered brashness enough to inquire:

"What happened to your friend Marks?"

"H'mph, never mention that boob's name to me ag'in!" she snapped.

"What'd he do?" asked Bill in surprise.

"Do! He ain't no gen'l'man—no manners a-tall. Came up to see me soakin' wet and nearly ruined our new tapestry divan! My mother is layin' for him with a rollin' pin. Besides, his old umbrella dripped all over the carpet. He better stay away from our house."



# When the Worm Turns

by Thomas A. Curry, Jr.

Author of "The Wings of Love," etc.

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BEANO WAS MODEST, TOO MODEST, BUT SOMETIMES EXCESSIVE VIRTUE HAS A KICK IN IT. . . . .

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**I**T don't do to push a man too far, even though he ain't very forward," remarked Big Jim. "There was that modest young feller, 'Beano' Wilson. He was so bashful he'd step on his own feet and then apologize."

"What a queer name," I said. "Beano. It sounds like a fruit." My observation was permitted to go unmolested. I put my feet up on the worn railing of the little porch and scanned the dusty road in search of movement. I saw a yellow butterfly shining in the Texas sun, alighting now and then on the unmoving, unprotesting flank of a prostrate hound dog.

"Modesty is the best policy sometimes," I said, trying to start the conversation again. I preferred that the talking be on Big Jim's side. He seemed to be of the same inclination.

Big Jim stretched in the rocker and almost fell over backward. The start awoke him and he relighted his everlasting pipe. I closed my eyes, but the yellow glare was still there.

"Now I was always a modest young man when I was young, as well as a brave one," said Big Jim, reflectively going back twenty or thirty years. "And I find that when the modest ones get goin' they're hard to stop. Push a timid steer too far and he'll horn you every time. Young Beano was like that. On'y it looked like he'd never get started. He'd turn every time, but he allus went the wrong way. He'd run away rather than fight. Too bashful to raise a rumpus."

"He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day," I quoted.

"Yeh," said Big Jim, as if agreeing with an original remark. "But if you keep runnin' away, you don't live to fight another day. You on'y live to beat it."

"True," I said. "Too true. But about Beano?"

"Beano come to town when he was twenty or so. I was 'bout thirty-five then. Beano wasn't very big, 'bout five feet eight or so and not heavy. His



hair was yaller and he had a nice laugh, but he was allus blushin' when there was any gals around. And he wouldn't put either foot forward when it was his turn. He'd work on a range and never have one fight. It was amazin', what he'd take. He was the town laughin'stock, he was, and he didn't seem to ever get mad. The gals, they liked him, but he was too bashful to talk to 'em. I've seen him stand on one foot and then the other for an hour, yessin' and noin' and bowin' to a lady what talked like a coffee mill all the time.

"There was one gal he seemed to favor, for he'd blush redder when she spoke to him that for any of the others and he would foller her around carryin' her bundles and slavin' for her, but I didn't think he ever dared ask her for a kiss or nothin'.

"'Beano,' I says one day. 'What're you so bashful for round Esther?' He offen come up to sit on the porch with me, 'cause I never deviled him.

"'I dunno, Jim,' he says. 'But when she talks to me I just like to listen. Seems as if it's better than music, just hearin' her.'

"'Yeh, but you oughn't to be so scared of everybody, boy,' I tells him. 'She don't like it.'

"'I know she don't, Jim. She's allus tryin' to get me to be braver. But somehow I can't do it. I don't get mad ever.'

"Well, I see there wasn't no use worryin' him, so I shifted the talk to somethin' else.

"Twenty years ago the town wasn't what it is now. There was on'y a couple of saloons and a few houses along here, no Fords like now and no movies. All transportation by horse and all the amusement was drinkin' and cussin', and a little flirtin' 'cause there was ten or twelve gals in the town and a hundred or so cowmen.

"There was a bad man here in the town, too. He was named Jackson, I

think, but we called him the Bully or just Bully, for that was his specialty.

"The Bully was suspected of doin' some dirty work nigh'ttimes, but nobody dared ask him about it, not even the sheriff, 'cause the Bully was darn quick to answer back, and his answers wasn't too gentle. If they'd have caught him in the act of doin' anything wrong, they could have shot him on sight, but he was too slippery and too good at coverin' his tracks for them to get anything on him.

"Over there in the saloon the Bully would cut up and when he got liquor in him he was mean. 'Course Beano was meat for him.

"'Beano, you two-legged, cross-eyed son-of-a-steer-chasin' walrus you, come over here and show us the latest steps! That's the way Bully'd talk.

"'Yessir,' Beano'd say. And he'd do anything Bully'd tell him to.

"One night durin' a windstorm, a couple of thousand dollars' worth of gold disappeared. It was for payin' off the men in three sections, and although it was pretty well watched, the money was stolen. Now most of us figured that Bully had somethin' to do with it. But we couldn't say nothing 'cause we had no evidence. The company offered a big reward.

"'Beano,' I says to the boy one day, 'here's your chance. Get the goods on the Bully and you'll be famous enough to never have to fight again.'

"He jumped a little at that, like he was scared of even the thought of it.

"'Me?' he says. 'I ain't goin' to fool with him!' He was lookin' sort of downhearted and so I dropped it.

"'What's the trouble?' I asks him.

"'Nothin',' he says, tryin' to lie.

"'Is it about Esther?' I asks him.

"'Yeh,' he says. 'Jim, she says she won't marry me until I show I ain't scared of Bully.' He was almost cryin' then.

"How Beano ever got to propose to

the gal I don't know. He must have taken about two years to get up his nerve and two hours tryin' to get out the words to ask her. I was surprised. I went inside after a while and went to bed, leavin' Beano sittin' alone. I couldn't go to sleep, and as I was lyin' right near the window I could hear what was goin' on outside.

"Beano, he sat there smokin' for a long time. It was pretty late when he got up and went down the steps. And then I heard the click of a gun and a voice I knew was the Bully's.

"'Oh, it's you, is it,' says Bully.

"'Yessir,' says Beano, right smart,

"'I thought it was that big fool of a Jim Davis. He thinks he's pretty good at playin' target, but I'll show him.' The Bully didn't bother me much 'cause I could shoot and I was big.

"'He's asleep,' says Beano.

"Then the Bully comes closer to Beano and I had to listen right hard to hear him.

"'Remember,' says the Bully, 'if you tell I'll bore you full of daylight.'

"'I won't, I won't,' says Beano.

"'Beat it, quick,' says Bully.

"That made me think pretty hard. I was half afraid Beano was in on the robbery, the way the Bully talked. But then I remembered how bashful and backward and modest Beano was and I couldn't quite believe he'd steal. Anyway I knew the boy was honest.

"Well, time run on and there was a big holdup and again they suspected the Bully, but again nobody could speak. The sheriff was gettin' desperate. The county offered a big reward to the man who caught the highwayman.

"And every little while, Beano would come flyin' out of the saloon, runnin' away from the Bully. Or he'd do a dance to the tune of the Bully's guns.

"I would have butt in, but I was wishin' for the time when Beano would get mad."

Big Jim paused. He lit his pipe again. It seemed to never need refilling.

"Very interesting," I remarked, taking out a cigarette and trying to keep myself from heat prostration in the lighting of it. It was very, very hot. "Go on," I found the energy to say.

Then I sat still and watched a carriage turn out to keep from running over the yellow dog in the street.

Big Jim continued.

"Well, one day it happened. I was sittin' on the porch listenin' to the Bully roarin' at Beano in the saloon. Esther, Beano's gal, she was sitting doin' some sewin' on the porch right next to mine and directly opposite to the saloon. And there was several women near by listenin', too, all on my side of the street, 'cause on the other side was nothin' but the saloon and a big, high old fence down to the corner.

"Then out comes Beano from the saloon, backin' up like a broncho, keepin' time to Bully's guns.

"'Back up, jump, you little yaller-haired, white-livered piece of sheep,' says the Bully complimentarylike. And Beano backed up.

"'Git up,' says the Bully, and Beano comes a little forward.

"'I said back up!' roars the Bully. Poor Beano kept goin' and I saw Esther was like to cry to see him treated so. The other women was laughin' a little, watchin' the fun, 'cause they knew Beano wouldn't get hurt.

"Beano backed all the way across the street and the Bully he give him an awful push up against the fence. Beano, he danced while the Bully shot at his feet.

"'Oh, dear, dear,' says Esther, by this time cryin'. 'He'll hurt Beano. I know he will.'

"I thought it was 'bout time to help Beano out and I started to get up. But then the Bully turned away and says, 'Nough for to-day, you poor little runt.'

"Beano starts to slide along the fence to get away, keepin' his face to the Bully and the gals and me. Suddenly the Bully decided he'd show off to the gals some more.

"Come back here,' he yells at Beano. 'You come acrost the street and do some turns for the ladies before you got to get your oats.' Beano didn't run, but kept right on backin' along the fence.

"The Bully run over to him. 'Come on,' he says, tryin' to pull Beano over.

"Wow! Then started the fight. Bully never thought Beano would dare to fight back and he'd emptied his pistols. Beano pulled his gun and I thought he was goin' to kill the Bully then and there.

"Put down that gun,' says Bully. 'And do what I tell you.' He moves up to the kid again. Beano pulled the trigger, but the lock on'y snapped. I guess he didn't dare keep his gun loaded for fear it would go off.

"But then he threw the gun at the Bully's head and caught him in the eye. The Bully rushed at him. Beano led out with all his might and took Bully in the stomach. But Bully was pretty husky and he clouted Beano in the nose and drew some blood. Beano fought like a grizzly and never flinched an instant. Esther was watchin' him with her eyes shinin', 'cause he was fightin' so well.

"Sheriff,' yells Beano, 'come over here. This is the man who stole the gold and who's been doin' all the hold-ups.'

"The sheriff runs over and I, too. 'What!' says the sheriff. 'How do you know, Beano?'

"I seen him comin' out with the gold when he stole it. He told me he'd kill me if I told, but I don't care!' He punches the Bully in the mouth again.

"Quit!' roars Bully. 'I surrender.'

"And so Beano got the reward all for himself and the Bully went to jail on

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Beano's evidence and when he was committed he confessed to the jobs. Esther was glad and Beano and she was married soon after. I was happy, too."

Big Jim stopped again.

"The worm turned,' I said.

"No, he didn't,' said Big Jim. "When Beano fought with the Bully he kept his face to us all the time. And had to fight like a wild cat to do it. And when he finished he backed along the fence to the corner and went home. I saw him the next day.

"Beano,' I says, 'you're a hero. What'd you want to run away for afterward?'

"I couldn't stay around all them gals,' says Beano.

"Why not? You ain't bashful any more, are you?' I asks. 'That was the best and bravest fight I seen in a long time.'

"Jim,' says Beano, 'I wouldn't have done it if I could have got away. But when the Bully tried to make me dance around for the gals I couldn't do it.'

"What was the matter?' I asks. 'What made you get brave so quick, anyway?'

"Well, to tell the truth, Jim,' says the boy, 'the Bully backed me up to the fence, and when he give me a push I must have caught on a nail. When he pulled me back I heard somethin' rip. I couldn't dance around in front of all them gals then. I had to do somethin'. When he called me back I couldn't run away. And so I fought off the Bully, and I wasn't scared of him or any one else when I felt him under me, yellin' for help.'

"Beano,' I says, 'you're the modestest man I ever met. Just cause you tore your trousers leg you took a chance on gettin' killed.'

"I thought it was that what tore, too, Jim!' says Beano. 'But when I looked after I was out of sight I found it was on'y my handkerchief which was stuck in my belt.'"

# The Misfit Man

by F. R. Buckley

Author of  
"The Other Check," etc.



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FOR SOME GENERATIONS WE HAVE BELIEVED THAT "WHEN IN ROME, DO AS THE ROMANS DO." NOW, ACCORDING TO PETER MARTIN, IT SEEMS THAT WE ARE ALL WRONG. WE SHOULD PUT A LITTLE SNAP IN IT AND "DO AS THE ROMANS DON'T DO."

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## CHAPTER I.

ON the sky line of the ridge at whose foot sprawled the shacks of Hades City, a tall young man in sober clothes was talking confidentially to a rattlesnake.

"You," he was saying, as his right hand dropped back to where a prospector's hammer dangled from his belt, "appear to me to have a mighty ugly disposition, sonny. See?"

The big snake dropped its head an inch or two, and added to the warning of its rattle the additional threat of a long hiss. The young man's fingers closed on the handle of the hammer, drew the weapon forth, and held it, quivering slightly, ready for a throw.

"Therefore——" said Peter Martin.

Hades City was a full mile away down the slope; but the evening air was still, and sound—especially such sound as the inhabitants of Hades liked to produce—traveled far. The crash of glass which proceeded from the Here's How tea house as a miner swept bottles and glasses off the bar, and the scream of laughter which went up as, having accomplished this humorous feat, the joker fell unconscious

on the floor, came clearly to Peter's ears. And, hearing it, the young man twisted the wrist which was about to send the hammer thudding into the snake's coils, and, instead, hurled it with a crash into the rubble on which the serpent lay.

"Git, you son of a gun!" Martin roared, as the rattler, terrified, streaked away. "Git to some other part of the country! I don't blame you for bein' mean. Stay around these parts an' you'll get so vicious you'll die of your own poison."

Picking up his hammer again, and seating himself on the pack he had dropped when the snake had glided out of the rocks to confront him, the young man rested his chin on a broad brown fist and took a panoramic view of the country visible from the ridge.

"Gosh, what a dump!" he said.

As a matter of fact, the landscape was momentarily looking its best. A cloud of sunset-tinted steam from the hauling machinery was veiling the hideous red derricks of the Henderson copper mines; the decrepit, unpainted tower and smokestack of the Virgin shaft were out of sight around a shoulder

of the ridge; the reflection from the scarlet sky and the violet horizon softened the barren, rocky flats and mounds of the district; and in that pastel-tinted light even Hades City, with its buildings made of signboards stolen from the side of the railway track, looked comparatively inoffensive.

But it was not to the physical aspects of the locality that Peter Martin was alluding. In his week of prospecting with Hades City for headquarters, he had formed most unfavorable opinions of the county—it had no water, no forage, no roads, no trees, and no animal life, except human beings and snakes. It was to the human beings that Peter particularly objected. On the whole, the snakes had proved infinitely more tolerant of strangers, and much less vicious in their dealings with each other.

"Cleaner-lived, by a darn sight, too," the young man muttered, rising and picking up his pack. Down in the Here's How tea room, the party with which the town drunkard was celebrating his weekly birthday was just getting into its stride. At one end of the oil-lit room, Con Meyer, the tea room's owner, was methodically kicking the limp body of the smasher of his glasses toward the door, grinning as he imitated, in his bull's voice, the screams of a painted girl who was still sober enough to watch him. Among the tables which dotted the dance floor half a hundred couples, ninety per cent male and one hundred per cent intoxicated, stamped about, drowning the music of a disreputable phonograph with their maudlin yells. It seemed to Peter Martin that the clean clatter of pebbles under foot would be preferable to his ears; and so, kicking his feet as much as possible among the rubble, he started down the slope toward the town.

He had advanced about fifty yards when the almost simultaneous sounds of a motor horn, a revolver shot, and a woman's scream, cutting in sharply

above the more distant medley of sound from the Here's How, made him stop dead for an instant, then drop his pack and run at top speed toward the narrow track which ran around the ridge, from the Virgin Mine to Hades City.

From the time of the gold rushes onward to the present, the empire west of the Mississippi has seemed, by some strange automatic process, to separate itself into two perfectly distinct parts—the desirable and the undesirable; and, without statutes or police, to segregate the latter of these sections. In 'forty-nine there were hundreds of more-or-less-permanent towns peopled entirely by desperately hard-working men who wore no guns; and there were perhaps six camps in which every man went armed, with the avenger of blood at his heels.

When, in later years, the cattle of the great ranges gave place to sheep, there was civil war in perhaps three counties; elsewhere not a shot was fired. And it is the same to-day, as the oil men and the miners are butting into the sheepman's hard-won domain. In half a dozen towns the white lights never go out; death patrols the streets by night and by day, while in the rest of the country millions of people of whom one never hears continue to work hard by day and sleep soundly and safely at night. There is something about the open spaces which gives men and women with the small, weak criminal soul an irresistible longing for the companionship of their own kind.

On the last evening of Peter Martin's stay in Hades City four gentlemen of this stripe, stimulated by each other's presence and much bad whisky, had actually gained courage to shamble beyond the city limits and to hold up with their eight revolvers a battered tin motor car containing a girl. One shot had been fired—the bullet had torn through the radiator and flattened itself against the long-suffering engine—and as Peter

Martin, hammer in hand, passed a clump of sagebrush ten yards from the halted car the man who had fired stumbled forward, and with a howl of drunken laughter stretched out his arms toward the girl in the driver's seat.

He did not touch her, however. As his uncertain foot gained the running board, the hammer which Peter Martin had refrained from throwing at the rattlesnake took this more contemptible animal in the small of the back and dropped him, bellowing and gasping, into the dust. And the next instant a fist accustomed to swing that hammer against unyielding quartz met the chin of a second holdup man with a thud, knocking him head first over the hood of the little car.

"It's the Easterner!" mumbled one of the two remaining. "Plug him, Harry. Go on, plug——"

With the wisdom of his kind, he was trying to delegate the responsibility of this urgently needed action; but his drink-shaken finger betrayed him, and as he backed away, pushing his companion forward into the fray, his right-hand gun exploded, and a bullet raised dust at Peter's feet. He realized his mistake at once, and, turning, started to run. With a short laugh and a long leap Peter Martin dropped his flying hundred and sixty pounds of weight on the fugitive's shoulders, at the same instant swinging a terrible right up under the ear. Nothing would have been easier than for the fourth man to kill him as he rose clear of this fallen foe; but no shot was fired. Left alone, albeit with two heavy revolvers against an unarmed man, the remaining bandit had fled. When Peter, brushing dust from his eyes, turned to end the combat, he was fifty yards down the track, running wildly toward the friendly lights of the town.

The silence, as Peter stared after him, was suddenly broken by a silvery laugh.

"Thanks awfully for saving my life, and all that," said a soft, lazy voice from the shadow of the roadster's top, "but doesn't he run like a gander?"

It appeared to Peter's exploring tongue that a valuable canine tooth had suffered during the fracas leading up to this amusing conclusion. He removed it carefully with finger and thumb and, following an age-old habit of humanity, stored it in his waistcoat pocket.

"I don't believe," he then said gravely, "that I ever have seen a gander, miss. They're a kind of bird that floats, aren't they?"

"Yes," said the voice from the car, with another ripple of laughter, "of course they are."

"Well, you see," Peter explained, "I come from the Colorado Desert."

"I thought you were from the East?"

"No," said Peter, feeling a lip which appeared to be split by a half-inch cut. "They just call me that around here because they claim I'm too refined. Not caring for red, I wear a khaki shirt, which kind of annoys them; and then, again, I wash and shave when possible, and don't swear when it can be helped."

"Doubtless," said the lazy voice, with a mocking thrill in it, "you are the younger son of a British nobleman, who has grown tired of the trivialities of the fashionable world. Do say you are!"

In the mocker's opinion, it was embarrassment which caused Peter to hesitate thirty seconds before replying; but, on the contrary, it was merely a mouthful of blood, shed in her defense, of which he wished to dispose without shocking her. Having solved this problem:

"No," he replied. "My dad was a professor of metallurgy. Came out to the Colorado prospecting—and stayed."

"Why?"

"There wasn't enough money in being a professor."

There was a momentary pause.

"Come here," said the silvery voice in rather a subdued tone.

Peter moved slowly over to the side of the roadster. A slim hand, thrust impulsively from the shadow, fell on his arm.

"I've just realized," said the voice, "that I'm a beast to joke with you when you've just saved me— You'll forgive me, won't you? It's the thing, back East, to pretend that everything's funny, and— Why, your lip's cut!"

In an instant the roadster's door flew open, and the girl, whom Peter Martin had not yet seen, was standing on the running board in the light of the half-risen moon, a perfectly useless lace handkerchief raised halfway to the bleeding mouth.

"S all right," protested Peter in an indistinct mumble very different from his clear, slow speech of a moment before. "I—er—ah—er—"

The words trailed off into silence; the girl made no motion. For five seconds, that seemed like a year, no sound was to be heard on the trail save the slow dripping of water from the punctured radiator of the car. Though neither Peter nor the girl heard that; their hearts had suddenly started to thunder in an inexplicable manner which each feared must be perfectly audible to the other.

"I'm—awfully sorry——" said the girl in a strange, breathless voice.

Peter reassured her.

"That," he said in the measured, laborious manner of one who emerges from an anæsthetic, "is quite all right. Not at all. I—er—I mean, I can get that fixed in town in just a minute."

"If you could come up to the house," the girl said, "there's peroxide and all that sort of thing; and I know the colonel would want to thank you—I haven't introduced myself, but I'm Virginia

Way, and I'm staying with Colonel Lockhart, who owns the Virgin Mine, you know. He was a sort of uncle of my father's."

"I'm sorry," said Peter, "but I'm leaving town to-night—in fact, in about a quarter of an hour—and if I miss this train I can't go for two days. They only run a train on Monday and Thursday. My name's Peter Martin. I'm a prospector. Haven't struck anything here, so I'm going somewhere else."

The conversation had a certain incoherent quality which Peter disliked, yet which he could not remedy. Nor, try as he would, could he keep his eyes away for more than ten seconds at a time from those of the girl. The young man was not sufficiently unsophisticated to be ignorant of what ailed him; but it was his first experience of the tender emotion, and his early training had not equipped him with the smiling mask which Virginia wore as she looked at him. He felt that his eyes were absolutely giving him away—in which he was quite correct. What he did not know was that the girl was praying for a miracle that would remove the carefully trained mockery from her eyes, and let them give her away, too.

So that he felt extremely miserable.

"Well, good-by," he said, blushing violently.

"Must—must you go?"

Peter searched his mind for something to say; but it was given over, in spite of himself, to whirling fantasies.

"Yes," he brought out with difficulty.

Similarly, and with the same result, the girl on the running board ran over her vocabulary for the right phrase.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

There was a long pause.

"Well—good-by," said Peter, when the silence had become unendurable.

"Good-by!"

Suddenly she had an inspiration.

"Won't you start the car for me?" she asked. "The man shot it, and——"

Peter twisted the crank, and with the lack of tact for which cheap automobiles are famous, the wounded roadster broke at once into cheerful explosions. It was willing to go anywhere and do anything. There was not the slightest need for any stranger to offer any further assistance.

"Well—good-by."

"Good-by!"

And so, without a handshake, the two parted; and as Peter, totally oblivious of the pack he had dropped on the hillside, walked rapidly toward Hades City, he heard the roadster, with an increased fusillade of explosions and an agonized whine of low gear, start around the turn of the track which led to the home of Colonel Lockhart.

He was still walking rapidly, quite unconscious of his surroundings, when the voice of Con Meyer boomed in his ears. Waking with a start, he realized that he was opposite the Here's How tea room, which lay on the way to the railroad track. Con Meyer's bulky silhouette filled the orange-lighted oblong of the door, and at various windows appeared the shadows of other men, crowding to look out into the heavy dusk.

"Hey, you—dude, Easterner, yella-belly, Martin, or whatever you call yourself," roared the drink seller.

Peter walked over to within two yards of him.

"Yes?" he asked mildly.

It is difficult to say just what Con Meyer would have done had he been able to gauge the power of the emotions which were boiling within the man he addressed. Probably he would have gone ahead with his project, for though a bully, he was not a coward. But he would have gone ahead much more carefully. When tormenting a man who has just fallen in love for the first and only time, has given the girl up as inaccessible, and has started away, never to see her again—it is wiser to use any

hand that one may have at liberty for the hoisting of a lethal weapon to some convenient position, rather than for the shifting of a cigar from the left side of one's mouth to the right. Con Meyer, however, did not know, and so he merely moved the cigar.

"We-e-ll," he said, "and so here's the squire of dames, all dressed up in his gentlemanly clothes, going to take a Pullman drawing-room back to his luxurious home in the effete East."

He chewed the cigar butt while his satellites within the tea room paid him the tribute of laughter.

"Yeah," he said when the snigger had ceased, "you're the right one to rescue her, all right. She says, 'Oh, awf'ly!' and then you say, 'What-ho, old bean!' and you have a lovely time together."

Peter covered another yard of the distance separating him from the big man.

"Shut up," he said.

"Ew, rahly, ole chap, doncherknow," said Meyer, "shawly yah ain't gewin' to 'it me, are yer? Ew, don't 'it me! What would the poor gal do if you was brought around all shot full of holes, doncherknow? That'd be awf'ly——"

He did not finish, because at that exact moment the cigar in the right corner of his mouth was driven clear back into his gullet by the impact of Peter Martin's left fist, which, following the red-hot tip and spattering it over the big man's face, completed its swing against Meyer's teeth, and knocked him sprawling backward into a knot of his friends. And then his face was trampled on by a hobnailed boot as the prospector climbed over his body for two punches at those friends. They fell heavily on their leader, groaning; a revolver shot blotted out one of the hanging lamps; somebody on the dance floor threw a chair. Then Peter Martin turned from the minority to the majority, and the fight was on.

Had any one in the hall been even



comparatively sober, of course, he would have been shot to death before he could take more than one step forward; but, on the other hand, had they been sober, the men present would scarcely have cared to side with Con Meyer against the quiet stranger, whose length of limb, breadth of shoulder, and firmness of jaw had been widely noted during the week of his stay in Hades. Even though far, far above themselves, those present had been painfully impressed by the narrative of the holdup man who had escaped from the battle near the roadster. It had taken the combined efforts of Con Meyer and of "Bully" Blake, the night superintendent of the Henderson Mine, to assure the gang that Peter was a false alarm.

And by the irony of fate it was upon Blake, next after Meyer, that Peter laid his hands. Leaping at the big man's throat, chancing the explosion of a revolver whose muzzle touched his ribs, Peter bent him backward, suddenly slipped an arm under his back, lifted him, and with a sidewise heave jammed the bully's head and shoulders through a window, where he left him, caught in the frame and bellowing like a calf. And he left him only just in time. Bully had no friends, but many supporters, and four of these choice spirits were advancing on Peter as he turned.

"Put 'em——" began one threateningly—and then ceased suddenly as his mouth, nose, and solar plexus came simultaneously into contact with the board floor, his revolver exploding as he fell. For with a lightning duck and leap forward Peter had hurled himself like a projectile against the man's knees, sweeping them from under him. And as the fallen leader writhed in an agony of breathlessness, two of his companions, punched in the back of the neck by the quiet stranger who a moment ago had been in front of them, fell unreservedly across each other.

"Don't shoot!" howled a muffled

voice from the window frame. "You dern fools, don't shoot! You might hit me!"

It was the voice of Bully Blake, only too conscious of his chance of catching a stray bullet; and for an instant the fourth man of the quartet who had come to his rescue, hesitated over the pulling of his trigger. In that instant he felt Peter Martin's left hand seize the revolver, while the corresponding right hand struck him a dazing smash on the cheek bone. He dropped to his knees, rolled over on his side, and lay there peacefully thinking how much his present sensations resembled his feelings when kicked by a mule.

"Now wait a minute," he heard the voice of Peter saying from six feet above him. "Wait a minute before we go any further. I'm standing here with a gun in my hand, and I think somebody's going to get seriously hurt. If you men want me to treat you like bipeds, you'd better let the ladies get out of the room before we start."

One of the girls at the far end of the hall made a panicky advance toward the door, but a vast hand from the crowd seized her arm and held her.

"I don't know," said a hoarse but sobered voice from somewhere in the rear, "that this is any quarrel of ours, is it, boys?"

There was a rumble of negation.

"I don't wanna get shot!" shrilled the girl, trying to tear herself loose.

"Nor do we," growled the giant who was holding her.

There was a general chuckle. The corners of Peter Martin's mouth twitched.

Then, glancing at the clock which hung over the counter, he pushed his hair out of his eyes, pulled himself together, and walked slowly over to the door. There he turned and again faced down the room. As he noted with a grim satisfaction, it now had a far-from-festive appearance. Close at

hand, Con Meyer and his friends had risen, very much the worse for wear, and were standing by the counter feeling their various wounds. Near the window graced by the torso of Bully Blake, who was dismally howling for help, four more men were still prostrate. All the little tables about the dance floor were overturned, either by Peter's first charge or to serve as barricades. And in the back of the picture, made still more miserable by the patchy light of the one remaining lamp, crouched the whole sporting population of Hades, looking very far from sportive.

Peter wagged the revolver at them and cleared his throat.

"Before I catch the train," he said jerkily, "I should like to get something off my chest. It is my opinion of you, and it's too darn unpleasant to keep inside me any longer. First of all, then, you're the scum of the earth. Secondly, you're a miserable bunch of cowards. And thirdly, considering these first two qualities, you're a blot on the face of the West. I dunno what you came out here for, any of you. The Bowery and the Barbary Coast and the Third Ward and Carmine Street are the places for the like of you. I—I'm not talking to you ladies."

The girl who had tried to escape at the beginning of the fight suddenly burst into tears. Peter bit his lip.

"Got any thing else to say?" asked Con Meyer mockingly.

Peter turned and looked him full in the face.

"Yes, I have," he said. "I'm just going to tell you this, Meyer: I've been prospecting over this location, and I've seen a few things. I've noticed how the Henderson Mine has been trying to hog all the land around there, by having dummies take up claims. I've seen your name on half a dozen stakes, for instance."

Meyer flushed darkly.

"Why, you——"

"Shut up. That's the law's business—not mine. Here's what I'm going to tell you—all of you: I guess you're all tarred with the same brush, all Henderson thugs. I guess you know as well as I do that the Virgin Mine's got the head of the lode—old Colonel Lockhart's mine. And I guess you know why he hasn't been able to raise capital enough to work the mine, or even keep full shifts going. Henderson's prevented it, and I guess you know why. Henderson aims to get that mine for an old song, and I guess you're going to help him."

Con Meyer's voice was thick with rage.

"If we know all this, then," he snarled, "what're you tellin' it to us for, huh?"

"Just to inform you," said Peter slowly, "that I know it, too. And to remark that the day things start to happen at the Virgin Mine I'll come back and talk to you again."

There was a general chuckle through the room. One man might be able to clean up the assembled ruffians; but for one man to threaten the Henderson Mining Corporation was really absurd.

But Con Meyer was too angry to laugh. He stepped forward and shook a bleeding finger in Peter's face.

"You—you d——d Easterner!" he cried. "You come here an' tell us we ain't fit for the West. You——"

Peter smiled.

"Well, if you are," he said, "I'm not. I've had this Easterner thing thrown at me so often by alleged Westerners of your stamp that I almost hope there's something in it. Anyhow, I'm going to give it a chance. I'm sick of this kind of dump, anyhow. So I'm goin' East to-night."

He surveyed Con Meyer's face.

"But—in that matter of the Virgin Mine—remember, there are trains back!"

For some reason, this added the last straw to Meyer's burden of fury.

"You poor fool!" he almost shrieked, his face distorted with a wolflike grin. "You're doin' all this threatenin' because a girl's bin makin' soft eyes at you. You won't let her pore ole grandfather's cousin, that she's so fond of, lose his mine, won't you?"

"You shut up," said Peter, making half a step forward and clenching his fist. "Shut up, Meyer!"

"You fool," went on Meyer, "do you know who the girl is that you're startin' all this on account of? Do you know what she is, this girl that lets on to love her pore ole Civil War veteran of a great-uncle so much?"

He paused, and his beady eyes glittered.

"Why," he shouted mockingly at last, "she's John P. Henderson's ward!"

## CHAPTER II.

THAT section of the West—as might have been deduced from the number of undesirable strangers infesting it—was passing through one of the transition periods common to all rich and newly settled countries. The Hades City district—a storehouse of nonprecious ore—had been opened up by the individual prospector, and for a time worked by the private companies he formed. Now the eye of Wall Street had fallen on the land; John P. Henderson had bought, rechristened, and refurnished with machinery the old Maria Mine, and suddenly the whole character of life in the district had changed.

Previously each of the owners of the half-dozen decrepit mines dotted about Hades had emerged from each year's operation with a profit which, while not as large as efficient methods could have made it, was amply sufficient for his needs. Preferential freight rates, floating finances, and similar modern devices designed to give one man a

maximum profit at the expense of others, were unknown—until John P. Henderson arrived on the scene, and, as innovations, they had not been popular.

The remaining individualist mine owners, most of whom had located their own lodes, joined forces and fought the Henderson Mining Company for six months, very much as half a dozen naked Indians might, in their ignorance of modern improvements, band together to fight a machine gun; or six inexperienced pebbles form an alliance to stop a steam roller. There had been armed warfare, in which mine hands armed with nature's weapons had been met by Henderson's hired mine guards carrying riot guns; there had been appeals to railroad boards of directors and to government commissions, during which the Henderson array of counsel had made hay of their opponents' contentions; there had been conferences, both in Hades City and in New York, at which the ex-prospectors had argued, pleaded, and stormed, while John P. Henderson smiled, reiterated his offer to purchase their properties at his figure, and offered the alternative of bankruptcy.

At the end of six months he had gained every mine in the district, save one. Too late the individualists had tried to adopt corporation tactics and a commercial code of morals, had gone behind their agreement, and tried to sell out independently for a better price. With bland promises not to disclose the treachery, Henderson had bought out one after another and placed his own men on the subsidiary claims surrounding the property of each. He owned everything in the district—except the Virgin Mine.

Alone among traitors, Colonel Lockhart had refused to deal in treachery; when the rest retreated to Palm Beach with modest fortunes and uneasy consciences, Colonel Joe remained in the unpainted frame house on Virgin Hill, and gazed at the prospect of bank-

ruptcy as a man may who has nothing wherewith to reproach himself.

The country about him seethed with plot and counterplot; but a wound gained at Bull Run kept the colonel from associating with the country. Save for the aged colored servant who had accompanied the young master West from Kentucky "befo' de wah," and, lately, Virginia Way, the old gentleman was as much alone as he had been when he discovered Hades flats, with their population of Indians and bison.

"I do not blame your guardian, Vi'ginia," he had said gently, when the girl had once spoken of the situation. "I estimate his actions to be along the lines, so to speak, of mode'n progress, to which we must all bow—if possible. I regret, Vi'ginia, that to me it is not possible. I do not expect him to blame me for my upbringing, and I therefore cannot find fault with his. No. In fact, my main feeling is one of gratitude to him for bringing you down to Hades City with him. By so doing, I consider he has largely repaired the injury done me by youah respected fatheh in selecting him as a guardian for you ratheh than myse'f."

"You see, daddy thought——"

"And quite rightly," the colonel had interposed. "It was not fitting for a representative lady of the Ways to hide her light from the more appreciative eyes of the East. Quite. H'm! My personal feelings make me regret, but on the abstract question I am quite at one with youah fatheh, Vi'ginia. Quite."

"It looks so strange," the girl had said, "for me to be visiting a relative as if I were going from one hostile camp to another. I should think you'd suspect my good faith!"

"Such a suspicion might occur to Mr. Henderson," the colonel corrected gravely. "Not to me. And now might I ask you' permission to point

out the rema'kable effect of the sunset on the derrick head? Paint would doubtless preserve it better, but the lack of paint has its advantages, don't you think? A poetic pusson might almost trace a similarity between that structure and a spider's web. H'm!"

At seventy-three a man can be resigned and trustful much more easily than at twenty-four. While in Hades City the aged and crippled colonel, unable to reproach himself with any breach of his personal code, therefore smiled at approaching ruin and the suggestion of further treachery, Peter Martin, young and able-bodied, tramped about the streets of New York sickened by the rapid diminution of his saved funds, and with Con Meyer's last words a continual sore spot in his consciousness. Economically Peter was in the same boat with Colonel Joe, for just as surely as Henderson had driven mining competitors out of business by his financial thimblerrigging, he had, by means of his dummies taking up land for him on all sorts of pretexts, closed the Hades district to the independent prospector.

It was the third tract in succession which Peter had found so preëmpted, and his journey East had been the product of necessity. The small legacy which had come to him on the death of his father was almost exhausted; he had conceived the idea, since it was useless to try to prospect against Henderson, to get a job prospecting for that company until he could amass another grubstake sufficient to take him farther on his own quest.

Brought up by a father who had totally lacked business ability—where the legacy had come from was a perfect mystery—Peter had had no conception of the methods by which great corporations achieved their results. The side light thrown on the business by Con Meyer's hint had appalled him, the more terribly because he had realized

in that instant that he was in love with the girl who had lent herself to the business.

Of course, he had had his moments of failure to believe the accusation; he felt guiltily that if he had been a he-man of the type which dominates fiction he would never have doubted Virginia at all. But he was merely human, and what evidence there was pointed in the other direction. Con Meyer, he knew, was in Henderson's pay, and Con Meyer's bootleg saloon, in fact, an enterprise by which the thrifty magnate recovered a large portion of the money he was forced to pay his labor and his bullies. In Con Meyer's saloon, before the habitués had discovered that he was not one of their stamp, Peter had learned that the Virgin Mine controlled the head of the lode, and that Henderson was determined to get it away from Colonel Joe by fair means or foul.

And, looking back on his one interview with Virginia, with the distorted vision which sometimes afflicts young men who do not know where their next meal will come from, Peter seemed to see in the girl's carefully careless manner the indication of a heartlessness which might let her lend herself to such work.

Passionately he had told himself that he would put her out of his mind, guilty or not guilty, until he had earned leisure to investigate the matter more thoroughly; and, further, that the Henderson Mining Corporation should not be the agency through which he earned that leisure. It added not a little to his misery that he had not kept to the first part of this resolve for even five minutes after making it. To the second clause he had held desperately for two months; but now, of all the mining concerns whose offices crowded half a dozen tall buildings on lower Broadway, the Henderson Corporation offered the only opening.

There is honor among individual thieves, one poisonous snake cannot poison another; but the analogy does not hold among corporations. A dozen concerns which in their time had crushed the life out of hundreds of independent miners were now in the grip of Henderson; they were frightened, as their victims had formerly been, and, like their victims again, they were making pitiful efforts to hold out against the power of Henderson's millions by discharging all they could spare of their staffs.

On the other hand, the Henderson Corporation, perhaps by way of a crow of triumph over the International Copper Federation, which had just fallen into its hands, was advertising for a dozen men to replace the deceased company's representatives on the property.

Peter heard of it at a sort of engineer's employment agency where, with five dollars for which he now longed bitterly, he had registered himself. In telling him of the opening, the secretary, who had been extremely optimistic before the deposit was paid, shook his head sadly.

"You've no qualifications," he murmured, examining a card on which he had listed Peter's age, height, weight, color, nationality, parentage, state of health, preferences as to location, salary required, education, degrees, references, previous employment, and religion.

"I know ore," Peter informed him, "from the time of the incandescence of the earth to the cupola."

"No degree," the secretary mourned.

"I was taught," Peter informed him, tightening his belt over the aching void which should have contained his breakfast, "by the boss authority in the West. And I had ten years of his teaching instead of four. And I've been doing the work for fourteen years."

"A yard of sheepskin," said the secretary rather cynically, "would serve

you better than all that. We do things differently in the East, Mr.—er—Martin. If you will excuse me for saying so, in fact, we—er—

"Go ahead," said Peter grimly. "You mean my clothes?"

The secretary nodded. He was really a nice young chap, and his desire was to be helpful. That the man he was endeavoring to help glared at him may be explained by the old proverb dealing with the quality of the debate between a full man and a fasting.

"I've been told that before," snapped Peter. "To get a job prospecting on a burro, or bossing a shift of square-heads in a shaft, I must come all dressed up like a tea drinker. It's funny, you know. Back there in the West, they used to give me the raspberry because I was so darn Eastern in my ways. Here they give me the burro laugh because I look like a Westerner. On the train they tried to sell me Chicago-made Navajo blankets because they figured I came from New York; and here on the subway yesterday a cop searched me for a gun because he thought I'd deserted from Buffalo Bill's show, or something. I don't seem to fit anywhere."

The secretary coughed.

"Well," Peter inquired, "do I go after this job, or don't I?"

He had entirely lost sight of his resolve to have nothing to do with Henderson; but then, his last meal had been the day before yesterday, and it must be remarked that half as much hunger has ere now caused many a man to forget the whole Ten Commandments.

The secretary handed him a slip of paper.

"See Henderson himself," he advised. "And—good luck!"

"Thanks," said Peter.

And ten minutes later he had passed a glass door heavily lettered in gold, and advanced to the mahogany railing

which separated the Henderson Mining Corporation from the rest of the world.

"Card?" demanded an office boy when he asked to see the president.

Peter handed him the slip of paper.

"Oh, that!" said the youth contemptuously. "Wait a minute."

Peter seated himself on a mahogany bench outside the rail. The contemptuous office boy, a large consignment of gum tucked up under his left cheek bone, returned to the desk from which he had risen, and added the rattle of his typewriter to that of half a hundred other machines which filled the outer office. For half an hour the applicant for a job studied the frescoed ceiling, the rich furniture, and the backs of the necks of the smartly dressed stenographers—they were thriftily seated so that they could not waste time looking up when any one came in at the office door. At the end of that period he walked over to the railing and addressed the office boy.

"How much longer?"

"I dunno," the youth returned, without looking up from his keyboard. He had had an excellent breakfast himself, and had the money in his pocket for a satisfactory lunch. He was, moreover, busy drawing a platoon of soldiers composed entirely of small and capital o's, carets, and percentage marks. Hungry men looking for work were nothing in his young life.

"You go tell the president I'm waiting," said the man at the railing in a strange new tone.

The office boy looked up.

"Say, you—" he began. And then, his eyes meeting Peter's, he stopped. Nay, more, he rose, slowly and as it were automatically, from his comfortable seat.

"I've tried to be nice and polite and Eastern," said Peter; "now I'm hungry. Git!"

"W-w-what name, please?" asked the

office boy. He looked at Peter an instant longer, and added, "sir," which, though practically inaudible, was a striking tribute to the force of a hunger-strengthened personality. The youth was accustomed to call his father "kiddo," and had left no less than four offices consecutively because the managers of departments objected to his calling them by their Christian names.

"You tell Mr. Henderson that Peter Martin's here, Peter Martin of Hades City, and that the business is urgent. Hop it!"

And in two minutes from that word Peter confronted the great John Henderson.

"Good morning," he said, as he entered a private office whose entire northern end was a window. The glare of light in his eyes made it difficult to see the face of the man who sat with his back to the window, which was exactly what Henderson desired. He said himself that he used that office mainly as a place in which to play poker—with mines for cards and millions for the chips in the game. And he could not even play poker fairly. He wanted to see his adversaries' faces, without letting them see his.

"Well?" he asked.

An instant later he gave a short chuckle and leaned forward over the glass top of his desk.

"Well Mr. Peter Martin, of Hades City—and what can I do for you?"

The slip from the employment agency had been mislaid by the alarmed office boy.

"I want a job," said Peter succinctly. The light was hurting his eyes and making him feel untidy, unshaven, shabby—which, again, was just what John P. Henderson wanted with all his visitors. "I haven't any degree from any university; but I know ore and I can handle men. I understand this is a copper proposition, and I know copper."

"Oh, you want a job engineering, do you?" asked Henderson.

"Yes."

There was a moment's pause.

"I had thought—from what I have heard of you," said the magnate's voice softly, "that you'd probably be after employment as a prize fighter or a thug or something."

"From what—you've heard of me?" gasped Peter.

"Yes," drawled Henderson. "From my ward, first, and secondly from my manager in Hades City. Neither of them seemed to know anything about your mining abilities, but both advertised you as a first-class fighting ruffian. How many of my men did you savage in one evening? Was it fourteen or only ten?"

Peter's eyes hardened. His lips, compressed to a thin line, twitched slightly at the corners.

"I think ten," he replied coolly. "I regret even more than you do that it was not the larger number."

"You do, eh? And you expect me to give you a job, huh?"

The multimillionaire leaned across the desk again and let his eyes travel up Peter's shabby length from his dusty boots to his frayed string tie.

"You look like a tramp," he said slowly and happily. "And I guess you're hungry, too. And I'd like you to go on being hungry. In that rig, I guess it'll be some time before you'll find anything much to do in this town."

"I should imagine," said Peter, "that a man of your type could have a simple little wish like that. This is a small game compared with your usual, and I guess, as always, you've got the cards stacked. You should be able to win against me."

"The trouble," said Henderson, "is just that. I've only got to tell you to get to blazes out of here, and I think you'd be a good deal hungrier than you are now before you got together your

car fare back West. And I'd like to see you hungry, you lout. I'd like to see you standing outside bakeshops, sniffing the breeze. You think it's funny, don't you? Small game compared to my usual, you said. Well, I play all kinds of games. Whoever or whatever annoys me, I crush, whether it's one poor bum, like you, or a million-dollar concern. Get that? But in this case the cards are stacked for you. After my ward got home, and before Meyer—before my man at Hades reported to me, I promised I'd give you a job. Miss Way thought you'd probably drift in here, since you were coming East, and I promised——"

The door behind Peter opened, to admit the gum-chewing office boy. He had reproached himself, once Peter was out of sight, with having let a momentary terror of sudden death overcome his convictions as to the equality of man. This principle he was now resolved to reassert.

"Man to see you," he therefore told John P. Henderson, without troubling to remove the gum from his front teeth. "Name of Lockwood, 'r Lockjaw, or somep'n."

"Tell him," said John P. Henderson smoothly, "that I will see him in a moment. And—boy! Wait a moment. After that, go to the manager of the front office, and tell him to give you three days' pay—this is Wednesday. And then get out."

"I get a week's pay!" cried the boy, his utterance miraculously freed of the gum. "In Noo York——"

"Sue us for it," suggested John P. Henderson. "And get out!"

When the boy had gone, he picked up the desk telephone to confirm these instructions to the office manager direct, and in the moment he waited for the number he fixed his eyes, bright with a sudden idea, on Peter.

"Nothing is too small for my personal attention," he said. "You see?

And I have just thought of a way out of my dislike for giving you a job and my promise to give you one. If you want to, you can have a job. You can have the one that boy's just vacated!"

While he gave his instructions to his manager, the magnate's eyes remained on Peter's face mockingly, triumphantly. Then he put down the instrument with a crash and leaned across the table, grinning like a wolf.

"Well?" he asked.

For a single instant Peter's balled fist trembled to start on a journey to that vulpine jaw. But if he did that, or if he snarled, as he wanted to, that he would rather starve, John P. Henderson would win. And at the moment Henderson had boasted that he crushed whatever annoyed him Peter had been seized by an overpowering impulse to do nothing for the rest of his life but devote himself to annoying John P. Henderson, and not be crushed.

"You're on," he therefore said, smiling. "Fifty a week? Or is it ten?"

"It's twelve and a half," said John P. Henderson. "Now go and show Colonel Lockhart in." Again he gave that wolflike grin. "From what I know of you, I imagine you'd be rather in sympathy with this old gentleman. He's a fighter, too, but, like yourself, not quite fighter enough to fight me. And now you're going to show him into the room where he's going to tap the mat. He can't work his Virgin Mine, he can't meet his notes, and he's coming here to kick in with his mine for my price of twenty thousand dollars. You're a prospector. — You know how much it's worth, right there on the head of the lode. And who d'you think holds the notes he can't pay? Whose money d'you think it is that's ruined him? He came to borrow it off one of my banks; I wanted to lend it to him, but our loan quota was all full, so I explained it to my ward, offered her fifty per cent of the Virgin Mine when I got it in my



power, and *she* advanced the money! He don't know that, and I guess it'll about break his aged heart. His own niece! Show him in! Show him in!"

In the front office, Peter bent over the wheel chair. A frail, silver-haired old gentleman smiled up at him questioningly.

"I'm the man," Peter said hurriedly, "that rescued your niece from those men when she was visiting you in Hades City some time ago. No, I don't want thanks. Never mind what I'm doing here. What I want to tell you is—don't believe anything Henderson tells you this afternoon—don't believe anything he shows you, either, and above all, don't sign anything away to him. Will you promise?"

"Yes, but——"

"Is your niece in the East?"

"Yes. But——"

Peter made a gesture of silence and straightened himself.

"This way," he said to the aged negro behind the chair.

He led the little procession to Henderson's office, announced the colonel, closed the door, and returned to his desk. For the rest of the afternoon, as he filled the late office boy's place, his mind was busy composing a speech which, delivered to Virginia Way that evening, should point out to her the enormity of her offense, without—for Peter loved her, in spite of this vile affair—without hurting her too much. There was, too, the question of how he should gain entrance, in his shabby clothes, to the house of John P. Henderson; but it was on the former problem that Peter's mind mainly dwelt. How could he tell the girl that he detested and abhorred the thing she had done, and yet—and yet—and yet not make her think——

He puzzled over this until five o'clock that afternoon, which merely proves for the thousand and first time that the only things we worry over are the things

which are destined automatically to adjust themselves.

On leaving the office, Peter bought a newspaper. Going uptown in the subway, jammed like a sardine between a Polack, two negroes, a Chinese, and a laborer from Ohio, he wriggled the sheet upward and tried to read the small portion of it that could be seen while it was still folded. There was a line to the effect that four murderers had been executed the night before in Sing Sing prison, the announcement of the birth of a pig with two heads in Cranberry Plains, Georgia, and then, at the bottom of the column, this:

AUSTIN, TEXAS: The finding of a prospector's pack on a hillside near Hades City by a patrol of Rangers sent out to quell trouble at the mines has furnished a clew to the missing heir of the late Emery W. Hayes, of El Paso. The pack, which had apparently been thrown away, contained a birth certificate showing one Peter Martin to have been the son of Mr. Hayes' sister, with whom he had quarreled some time before her marriage. Advertisements for herself, or her children, were about to be discontinued when this clew was found. The estate amounts to about three quarters of a million dollars.

### CHAPTER III.

It was a strangely bright-eyed version of the usually calm Peter Martin who at eight o'clock that evening rested a trembling hand on the mahogany desk of the Hotel Biltmore and asked for Colonel Lockhart. There had been moments in his career as a prospector when he had thought a million dollars had sprung to light under the blow of his hammer. Immediately there followed moments showing the prospect to have netted merely a dead loss of the chemicals used in the assay.

Neither discovery nor disillusionment had ever previously made Peter's hand shake enough to spill one drop of nitric acid or shirk one flapjack of his usual quota. But this three quarters of a million was different. It had dropped

from nowhere as unexpectedly as the luckiest mining strike, but it had dropped at such a moment! It was not the amount of money which made the young man tremble as he addressed the reception clerk; it was the thought of what, in the peculiar circumstances, the money stood for. It was a complimentary ticket to the fight with Henderson; it was the price of a chance for a wallop at the giant who prided himself on closing chunks of God's country to numbers of God's creatures, who grinned at the joke of ruining an old man, and who could go about this task by the method of turning a girl into a traitress.

"Colonel Lockhart, you said?"

"Yes."

"Er—have you an appointment?"

Peter smiled and leaned across the counter.

"Yes, I have. And before you call the house detective, let me tell you that I am neither a holdup man nor a religious fanatic, but merely a harmless Westerner who has unexpectedly struck it rich. If my clothes don't satisfy your taste, blame Providence for not letting me strike it rich in time to change. Now, will you telephone the colonel, or shall I commandeered an elevator for myself?"

"Oh——" said the clerk.

The book of instructions he had under the counter, which prescribed his course of action in every emergency from fire to earthquake and civil commotion, was silent upon the subject of how to deal with persons who spoke in the exact variety of quiet tone employed by this Westerner. The clerk therefore telephoned, and five minutes later Peter faced Colonel Lockhart across the dinner table in the old gentleman's two-room suite.

"Did you sign anything, sir?" he demanded, as soon as formal greetings had been exchanged.

"No," said the colonel gravely, "but I am at a loss——"

"One moment—excuse me," Peter broke in. "Did he—tell you anything?"

The colonel shook his head.

"In that connection, however," he said, a little, puzzled frown between his brows, "he made what seemed to me an extr'or'n'y threat, Mr. Martin. When I first entered the room, he demanded whether I was ready to come to time and sell the Virgin Mine, which, in point of fact, I was, but which, in view of what you had said, I had decided to deny. The notes which will force me to sell do not mature for another two weeks. I pointed this out to him. Upon which he said that he wasn't goin' to argue with me, seh, and called me an unprintable variety of old fool, seh, and said that if I kept him waiting much longer he would not only ruin me, but would also break my heart."

Peter compressed his lips.

"I am at a loss how to deal with this pusson, in short," said the colonel gently. "He is a most extr'or'n'y man, Mr. Martin. Heartbreakin' has not previously seemed to me to be a necessary part of business dealin's, however unscrupulous, nor have I been accustomed to seein' a man who has just called another an insultin' name summon a gunman to protect him from the result of his action."

"I beg your pardon?"

"When he called me the name to which I have alluded," said the colonel gently, "I endeav'ed to climb out of my chair to resent it, seh. Upon which, with every manifestation of feah, Mr. Henderson pressed a button on his desk and summoned a sort of human ape with an automatic pistol in his hand. This bravo had actually been in hidin' in the room since befoah my entry, seh!"

With a prickling of the hair on the back of his neck, Peter congratulated himself on having restrained that im-

pulse to smash John P. Henderson on the jaw.

"What did you do?" he asked Colonel Lockhart.

"I pointed out to Mr. Henderson," said the old gentleman, "that he had committed a serious breach of good taste, and expressed my displeasure by at once leaving the room."

He smiled cheerfully at Peter Martin.

"And now—if I may put it in the form of a blunt question, seh, what are you goin' to do?"

"To be equally blunt," said Peter Martin, "how much are those notes which fall due in two weeks."

For a moment the colonel hesitated, his eyes on Peter's face. Then, imperceptibly nodding his head:

"They aggregate," he said, "about eighty thousand dollars. Why?"

"I propose," said Peter, "to pay those notes. And to supply capital for the resumption of work in the Virgin Mine."

"And in return you requiah——"

"A half interest in the property."

The colonel's eyes narrowed. He repeated his former question.

"Why?"

"To fight Henderson!"

"Is that the only reason?"

Peter Martin hesitated.

"No," he said quietly, "though it is the reason which is actually pushing me into this business, as it were. As a paying proposition, I think the Virgin is capable of making us both extremely wealthy men. Now, Westerners haven't any faith in my judgment because they think I'm an effete Easterner, and Easterners don't take much stock in me because they think I'm a roughneck from the West; but I *am* a good prospector, and in my opinion the Virgin's not only on the head of the lode, but it hogs all of the lode that's worth working. I believe Henderson only grabbed those other mines to get hold of the Virgin."

II BPEO

"My mine," said Colonel Lockhart slowly, "has never appealed to turn out a higher grade of ore than the others, seh."

"Have you ever had a good geologist go over the formations and tell you where to cut?"

The old gentleman shook his head.

"Well," said Peter, "you've got one now. You've been tunneling south, haven't you? Well, I judge that you are simply working one of the minor striations. By the contour of the land, and the character of the surface formations, I should guess that the main lode went just about due north. A fault may cut off any signs of it. But I'm willing to bet all I've got that it's there."

A broad, negroid voice sounded suddenly from the shadows of the room.

"Now, cunnel! 'Member whut doctuh say. No excitement!"

"All right—all right, Matthew," the colonel replied, smiling. His eyes were fastened on Peter's face. He added: "I am not supposed, in view of this wound, seh, to give way to any emotion. This aftehnoon's entertainment upset me considerably. H'm! H'm! I confess that this news of yours is inclined to stimulate my heartbeah."

The old man leaned back in his chair and for a moment closed his eyes.

"Without wishing to appeah curious," he said, "I should—ah—like to ask you, seh, the source of your wealth. My niece—er—did not convey the impression——"

Briefly Peter gave the details. The colonel heard him, his eyes still closed. At last:

"Matthew," he said softly, "go fetch a lawyer."

"Lawyeh, cunnel?"

"Yes. I wish to draw up a contract with——"

"If you'll pardon me," said Peter, "I should prefer that there should be no contract. If you agree to my pro-

posal, Colonel Lockhart, your word is sufficient. Walls have ears where John P. Henderson is concerned, and lawyers have tongues."

"I can scarcely believe——" began the old man.

"Your notes for eighty thousand dollars," asked Peter, "who holds them?"

"Why, the—eh—Fourth National Bank of Butte."

"Another name," said Peter slowly, "for John P. Henderson. Had you asked to have them renewed? No? Well, you see how much use it would have been. Colonel, that man's an octopus. He's everywhere. He's taken in the Broken Mountain field, the Broad River mines, the Gold Creek field—and all the banks and transportation facilities connected with them. He owns those places as he does his cigarette case. If he gets the Virgin Mine, he'll own the Hades flats just the same. Already he owns the banks there; the only reason we have a chance is that he hasn't tied up the railroads. He thinks he can get his monopoly without that expense. If he gets any advance information about this plan, he'll tie them up, and our only chance will be gone."

"But in the event of my death——"

"I'll chance that."

The colonel smiled.

"You put me to shame, Mr. Martin. I was about to requiah your word of honor that you did not come to me as an agent of Mr. Henderson. I do not requiah it. I shall be obliged if you will proceed with your plans. I give you carte blanche. I fear I shall not be of much assistance."

"Cunnel," boomed the negroid voice, "Whuffor you got to get all 'xcited ag'in like ol' warhawse? Dis young gemmun look afteh affai's fo' us. You sit still."

"Think he will, Matthew?" The colonel smiled. "Well, I'm something of the same opinion. As regards the

—eh—the prospect of my untimely demise, Mr. Martin, I have willed my interest in the mine to Miss Vi'ginia Way, whom you know. I shall write her a letter stating my arrangement with you, and I am suah——"

Peter's lips compressed themselves.

"I'd rather you didn't," he said.

"She—well—she's in the same house with Henderson, and with the best intentions——"

The old man waved his hand wearily.

"Just as you like," he said. "I—I am rather tired, I think. Most unbusinesslike arrangement, I suppose—gentlemen of honor——"

"Cunnel——" began the voice of Matthew.

"I hope, however," said Colonel Lockhart, "that you will keep me advised as to the progress of the battle?"

Peter smiled and nodded.

"I should be honored to shake your hand, seh," said the colonel weakly. "And afteh that I—think—I will go—to bed. Good evening, Mr. Martin! An'—good luck!"

Peter was waiting for the elevator at the other end of the passage when he heard his name called and saw Matthew running after him, the blue and white of a telegram in one dusky paw.

"Dis just come by bell hop through service elevator. Oh, Lawd!" the darky moaned. "I daren't give it to cunnel, 'less he die. Oh, Pharaoh an' de oppressors in Egyp', what wicked men de Lawd let live in de worl'!"

Peter took the telegram and read:

Shaft dynamited last night by parties unknown all lower levels blocked north wall of main shaft caved in at forty feet derrick and machinery uninjured wire instructions. Williams superintendent.

And before he had recovered from this body blow—a week later, to be exact, during which period he lived and paid for frantic telegrams to El Paso by pawning the clothes he stood up in—

fate dealt him another soul-staggering smash.

A week before he was due to pay off Colonel Lockhart's note for eighty thousand dollars, which would expose his part in the game and turn the fight against Henderson into an open fight of money against money, and brains against brains, he received a letter from the firm of lawyers who were administering his uncle's estate, saying that though the court formalities transferring the bulk of the estate to Peter's possession would not be concluded for two or three more days, they were sending him, in view of his urgent request, five hundred dollars on their own responsibility.

"We regret, however, to inform you," ended the letter, "that owing to the failure of the Texas Sheep-Raising Corporation, in which the testator was heavily interested, the estate cannot now be expected to amount to more than one hundred thousand dollars."

A wrecked mine and twenty thousand available dollars against Henderson's perfect organization and twenty millions! The fight was impossible.

Sitting there in his cheap hall room, his clothing cut down to the irreducible minimum of a jacket, a shirt, trousers, and a pair of worn-out shoes, Peter seemed to hear John P. Henderson's smooth voice pronouncing the doom of all who had the temerity to cross the magnate's plans. A flood of fury shook the young man.

"By Jiminy!" he cried suddenly, rising and shaking his desert-browned fist at the white-marble outline of the skyscrapers visible through his window. "By Jiminy, he shan't crush me!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

WILLIAMS, the superintendent of the Virgin Mine, was, as Peter had already learned from Colonel Lockhart, an old-timer and to be trusted. Immediately after the news of the dynamiting of the

mine, Peter had wired him, in the colonel's name, to post guards about the shaft and machinery, and make sure that no further damage was done. Now, still in the colonel's name, he sent a long telegram ordering Williams to make a careful survey of the point at which the dynamite had torn down the north wall of the shaft. If, as Peter had guessed, the main lode ran north instead of south, it was just possible that the blast, fired where the owners of the mine would never have dared fire it, might have opened up the possibilities of the mine, instead of burying them under the hundreds of tons of debris which had crashed to the bottom of the shaft.

Two days elapsed, and then Williams wired back, with a strange effusiveness in his wording, that the blast cavity showed traces of an ore-bearing formation. He added that it seemed rich, though he had as yet had no assay. It seemed so rich to him, in fact, that he actually spent extra money finishing his message with the words "by golly."

Peter read that telegram with his heart pounding. Then, with a new look of hope in his face, he spoke to the aged negro who had handed him the telegram outside the door of Colonel Lockhart's suite.

"Has Colonel Lockhart seen this?" he began. And then: "Matthew—what's the matter?"

The colored man's eyes were full of tears; he was wagging his white head from side to side in the peculiar manner of his race when under the influence of grief.

"Cunne! ain' seen dat wire," he said brokenly. "I wuz gwine tell you, when you git so absorbed in it. Cunne! ain' seen nothin' since late las' night, when he write letter to Miss Vi'ginia. Come finish dat letter, he tu'n to me 'n' say, 'Matt, guess you better fetch doctuh.' I fetch doctuh on de jump. Time I come back, cunne! mighty sick man."

Ain' et nothin' since, ain' spoke no word, ain' done nothin' but lie still. Gin'ral breakdown due to shock, doctuh say. Oh, my merciful Lawd, ol' cunnel break down so fah f'm home!"

Peter's nails bit into his palm. This, too, was Henderson's work.

He laid a hand on the negro's heaving shoulders.

"Has Miss Virginia been here yet?" he asked.

Matthew shook his head.

"She'll probably be in during the day," Peter said, his mind whirling between this catastrophe and the unbelievably good news contained in the telegram. "I'll be back later, too. Have you got enough money to be going on with?"

"I guess we has," said the old servant with dignity. "Thank you, suh. But if Miss Vi'ginia come, she can't see cunnel. Doctuh say nobody to see cunnel."

Peter thought a moment. There was nothing he could do here, and with the payment of the note only four days distant, every moment of his time was priceless."

"Matthew," he said at last, "I'm going to move from my present address to the Grosvenor. I'd come here, but it—might give the game away. Telegrams about mine business will still come here addressed to the colonel. Call me on the telephone about them, or anything else you may want. It's just around the corner from here, and I can be with the colonel in five minutes if I'm wanted. Get that?"

Matthew nodded.

"Meanwhile," said Peter, handing him the telegram, "keep this, and when the colonel wakes, read it to him. It'll do him more good than forty-eight hours' sleep and a gallon of medicine. Now I'm going."

A yard away, he paused and turned.

"Did the colonel," he asked, "have any friends, back near Hades City, who

were bankers? Any personal friends, I mean?"

"Use' to smoke a lot of cigars with Major Carter, that use' to be in ol' regiment with him," said Matthew.

To Major Carter, accordingly, at the First National Bank of Hades City, Peter sent another telegram:

Got capital to meet all present liabilities and leave surplus, but not immediately available. Attempt to wreck mine has opened rich vein. We control main lode. On this showing, can your bank make me ninety-day loan until capital is on hand?

To this he signed the colonel's name, and then, after some moments of hesitation, he pulled from his pocket the little book the colonel had given him, and composed a message in code. It was to Williams, the superintendent, and it ordered him to hire as many men as he could get from outside the sphere of Henderson's influence on the promise of double wages, payable two-weekly, and to get to work driving tunnels off the blast cavity.

Peter had no money wherewith to go into the market for labor. He was in this fight alone, without money, without experience, and without advice. The cash payment of his legacy would in all probability not arrive in time to take care of the note. Whether the Hades City bank would make a loan on the sketchy security he had indicated in the telegram was extremely problematical. He had not, in fact, the slightest idea of how the large payment was to be met. In the meantime, all he could do was bluff.

For the remainder of that day he worked on the construction of a bluff which, if Henderson's spies were on his trail, as he considered it extremely probable they were, should fill Henderson with uneasiness. Using his paltry five hundred dollars with as much abandon as if it were an inexhaustible gold mine, he engaged an expensive suite at the Grosvenor, bought a ready-made

suit of clothes that cost one hundred and twenty dollars, and, at the moment when Virginia Way's note reached him that evening, was engaged in the consumption of a dinner valued by the hotel at nine dollars and seventy-three cents.

"My dear Mr. Martin," it ran, "I should like to see you. The matter is extremely important. Can you come to my guardian's house this evening?"

The address was given—Fifth Avenue in the exclusive sixties. Hastily Peter signed the check, called for his hat, and took a taxi up the Avenue. The distance was one which he had walked several thousand times, over burning sand, burdened with a pack, and extremely short of water; but he was going into the enemy's camp, and he had no money. In the topsy-turvy world of New York, the circumstances demanded that he arrive in the most expensive manner possible.

Virginia, the butler informed him, was in the drawing room. He was announced and entered, and, as the girl rose from the bench of a grand piano, bowed formally to her.

She paused, halfway to him. Her hand, in the act of being extended, paused and fell to her side.

"You wished to see me?" Peter asked.

"Yes—I wanted to see you," the girl answered. "But—are you angry with me, or something?"

Peter looked at her. In her dress of cloth of silver, glittering in the rose light of half a dozen lamps each of which was worth, probably, more than the whole of his present cash resources, she appeared to the young man even more beautiful than she had in the stalled flivver on the Hades City road; in fact, she was, to all appearances, quite a different person, differently situated, and capable of quite different things. It may be very true that all is not gold that glitters, and that appearances are deceptive; but, proverbs to that effect

notwithstanding, it will require a revolution to make the human race stop taking at least a passing interest in iron pyrites, and several more revolutions to prevent it forming judgments as to character on a basis of outward appearance.

Peter Martin was not afflicted by the fictional idea that all well-dressed Easterners were of necessity villains; but the fact remains that had he now seen Virginia arrayed in a khaki suit and the high boots customary around Hades City, he would probably, in spite of his worry and anxiety, have been more careful of the manner in which he approached the delicate subject of the girl's alleged loan to Henderson.

"No," he said slowly. "I'm not angry, Miss Virginia. But I'm puzzled. I guess you know I'm kind of in partnership with Colonel Lockhart on the Virgin Mine proposition. It was a shock to me to find that the person who's holding the notes that are liable to ruin us is yourself."

A spasm of pain flitted across the girl's face.

"Do you deny that you hold them?"

It was a plea, but Peter was too agitated to care about histrionics, and the words came forth with the curttness of a defiance. Virginia Way's face whitened; her eyes, fixed on Peter's face, were cold.

"Under the circumstances," she said icily, "I don't think I should feel like denying it formally, even if it were untrue. As it happens, I do hold the notes. Have you any further remarks to make on the subject?"

Peter shook his head.

"No," he said huskily. "We're fighting Henderson, and so long as our obligations are in his control, it doesn't much matter whose name appears on the documents. Rather surprised it's yours, though. And a bit puzzled as to what you want to talk to me about, things being as they are."

His sorrow was so evident that for

a moment the girl's insulted pride relented.

"I—might be willing to renew the notes," she said, half smiling. "Had that occurred to you?"

Peter raised his head. No smile appeared on his face.

"If it's all the same to you, Miss Virginia," he said gravely, "I don't think you'd better. The colonel's mighty ill, as you know. I'm not sure whether he could attend to his end of the formalities, and if he could, it might be better for him to have to pay the money when it's due than to know that—er——"

He stopped short before the look in Virginia's eyes.

"You mean," she said slowly, "to know that his favorite niece had sold him out. Is that it?"

Peter hesitated. Suddenly the girl's anger blazed up. As a matter of fact, it was a question whether she should storm with rage or with tears; and, being more inclined toward the latter, womanlike she considered it a point of honor to choose the former course.

"I hate you!" she cried—rather surprisingly, considering that the conventions, in view of their half hour's total acquaintance, would scarcely have allowed her any emotions at all toward this comparative stranger. "I hate you! I brought you here to-night to tell you that my uncle had written me, and that I would do what he asked in regard to giving you your interest in the mine, should I come into possession of it through his death. He's so ill——"

The tears, however heroically forced back, now insisted on making their appearance. Virginia sank on the music bench from which she had risen, dropped her head on her outstretched arms, and sobbed.

Peter moved over to her side.

"Miss Virginia——" he began. This outburst of weeping, in his opinion, was due to remorse; but suddenly it came over the young man in a wave that, no

matter of what treachery this girl had been guilty, no matter what she had done, he loved her, and didn't want her to cry. Moreover, for one chivalric instant he absolutely refused to believe that she had joined in the conspiracy against the colonel. His hand hesitated over her shaking shoulder.

"I——" he began.

As suddenly as she had sunk to the bench, she rose, brushing his arm as she did so.

"Virginia——" Peter began again.

Her eyes blazed into his.

"Good night," she said quietly, and then, as he stood quite still, dazed by the alternating impulses to leave her and to take her in his arms, she turned and walked from the room.

Scarcely had the brocaded portières fallen behind her than they were lifted again, and John P. Henderson entered.

"Ah, Mr. Martin——" he began, smiling.

Peter was advancing toward the door.

"Get out of my way," he said. He was still wondering just what had happened at the stormy interview just past. He had a vague idea that he did not believe Virginia had betrayed her uncle to her guardian; yet he had clearly in his mind her admission that she held the notes. He had not much thought to spare for John P. Henderson, and the impersonal quality of his order to clear the way was terrifying.

"Jenks!" gasped the magnate.

The quiet individual of whom Colonel Lockhart had spoken arrived noiselessly at his master's side, pistol ready, and, acting as it were automatically, Peter Martin hit him under the jaw with his right hand, while with the left he wrenched the weapon from the private detective's grasp. Something about this action seemed to bring him into close rapport with his surroundings. It was more or less natural for a man who didn't like you to pull a gun, and for you to hit him in the most lethal place avail-



able and take the gun from him. After a period of this Eastern method of fighting with sums of money, and promissory notes, and so on, a touch of nature was refreshing.

Peter stuffed the pistol into his pocket and looked at the shrinking financier with a new light in his eyes.

"It's all right," he assured him calmly. "I'm not going to hurt you. Wouldn't have hurt this guy if he hadn't started exhibiting that gun. Now, what was it you wanted to say?"

Staring at the man before him, John P. Henderson realized that the danger of further physical violence was past. He therefore, after the manner of his kind, became extremely bold. For the prostrate Jenks, now beginning to roll aimlessly on his side and to paw blindly at his master's boots, Mr. Henderson, also after the manner of his kind, felt no concern at all.

"Never mind about your plotting with my ward!" the financier almost screamed, shaking his finger in Peter's impassive face. "I know what I'm playing at, and all your Western stunts won't alter what you're going to get. You think you can come and play Easterner, you hick! You think you can get my ward to double cross me for her old fool of an uncle! Do you think I didn't foresee that possibility? Well, I did. And if you want to examine that note, you'll find that while the money's hers, the question of extending the note or demanding payment isn't up to her, but up to me. Now, get that? It cost me five hundred dollars to have that note drawn up. I had the best lawyer in the United States do it, and it's as iron-clad as a battleship. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Peter felt in his breast pocket.

"So?" he asked, pulling out of the hundred-and-twenty-dollar suit a small muslin sack of tobacco and a packet of yellow papers. "I don't smoke a pipe, but I guess a cigarette will do as well."

"What have you got to say to that?" Henderson demanded in a voice hoarse with rage. "What have you got to say to that, eh?"

Peter had rolled his cigarette.

"Just what I said before," he remarked, feeling for a match. "And that is--get out of the way!"

He walked out into the crisp air of the Avenue, feeling strangely light-hearted. He had frequently seen gamblers, out West, start a game with five hundred dollars and a grouch, and wondered why they suddenly became hilarious when they had lost everything but the minimum of clothing and were about to stake that on the longest chance on the board. Now he understood. Matters in this gamble of his were about as bad as it was possible for them to be, and the feeling that, whatever he did, he could make them no worse, and that the only change possible would be for the better, gave him a most enjoyable sensation of freedom.

What, however, was there to do? This was Thursday; the note for eighty thousand dollars would fall due on Saturday. He could wait for news from his lawyers; he could wait for the bank's reply on that wild-goose application for a loan; he could await Williams' report as to whether or not labor had been secured to work the mine.

Wait—wait—wait!

He felt savagely that if he were out in Hades City, where a man's fists and personality, as distinct from his lower nature and his bank account—were of some use to him, he could busy himself about something. He could go out and grab a little labor himself, for instance, and stand over the men as they worked in the tunnel Henderson had blasted in the Virgin Mine—watching with his own eyes for the ore signs which should announce that his troubles and Colonel Lockhart's were over. For if the Virgin Mine did turn out to be on the main lode, if it could be shown conclu-

sively that it was able to produce richer ore at a lower cost than the other mines in the neighborhood, it would be possible to borrow not only eighty thousand dollars, but eight hundred thousand if necessary, and not from the petty political banks of Hades City and its environs, but from the big bankers of Chicago and New York.

But Peter was not in the West. He was here in the East, and there was nothing to do. He had had a wild impulse to go and see the general freight agent of the railroad which served Hades City, and to assure a free outlet for the mines' product, when the product should be available; but that activity was ruled out as premature, and as being liable to alarm Henderson to the point of tightening his grip on the railroad and finally closing it up to the Virgin's traffic.

Walking rapidly, Peter swung from the sidewalk, dodged five buses and three taxicabs, and entered Central Park. Absorbed in his thoughts, he did not notice where he was going. He left the main path and, following a narrow asphalted alley, was far from even the solitude-loving park-bench spooners, when suddenly he heard a scuffle of feet behind him, and turned just in time to receive the united assault of two men who sprang at his throat. To one of these—a short, thickset man in a wide-brimmed hat, he awarded a left swing that sent the assailant rolling. The second man, ducking a tremendous right destined for his jaw, seized Peter with a grip of iron, planted his knee in his chest, threw him backward, and fell on him.

"Come on, Shorty!" Peter heard him gasp as they rolled about the pavement in each other's grip.

It would have been difficult for Shorty to afford any great assistance, however, even had he been conscious, which he was not. The man who had fallen on Peter was of just about Pe-

ter's size and strength. The breath had been knocked out of him quite as much as out of his victim by the heavy fall. The fight was very even, and neither man seemed able to maintain the upper position for more than the fraction of a second. Peter, his weight thrown well forward, his knees cramped around his adversary's chest, was just about to tighten his grip on the other's throat when a heave of the powerful legs behind him spilled him over his assailant's head. In another instant the big man had crawled forward on his knees a yard and then thrown himself unreservedly on Peter's chest. Not a word was spoken, except that once, as Peter's fist came heavily home on his antagonist's nose the injured man gasped, "Jee-miny!"

It was scarcely five seconds after this exclamation had broken the snarling silence that Peter put into execution a trick he had chanced to pick up in the West. Suddenly relaxing all his muscles, he lay as if unconscious, and when the man on his chest loosed his grip and leaned closer in the apprehension of having killed him, tensed the muscles of his right arm and sent the fist whizzing to the jaw. It was the upper man's turn to relax now, and he did it very completely. He rolled off Peter with the apparent object of burying his face in the asphalt, and lay still.

Peter rose. The hundred-and-twenty-dollar suit was torn beyond repair, and there was not in the treasury the cash wherewith to replace it, but he felt better than he had for some time. Now, if all the scrapping in connection with the mine—

"I didn't know," said a sleepy voice from near his feet, "that that trick had traveled east o' Salt Lake yit. Oh, Lord, you never can tell, can yuh?"

It was the big man whom Peter had knocked out second. He was regaining consciousness. He was already on his knees and struggling to rise farther,

and he spoke with a most unmistakably Western drawl.

Peter slipped a hand under each arm and helped his fallen foe to his feet.

"Gosh!" said the risen warrior, tenderly feeling the point of his jaw. "You certainly pack a punch, stranger. Where did yuh learn that 'possum trick?"

"I forget just where. I think it was likely in Daly's saloon in Pueblo Indio."

"Are you from the West?"

"I am. And I wish," said Peter, "that I was back there."

His late assailant shot out a large paw.

"I'm with you, brother!" he said hoarsely. "An' I'm all broke up to have jumped on your neck. So'll Shorty there be when he learns what's what. I think I see him movin' his left fist now. Hey, Shorty, wake up! This gent's a friend.

"You see, mister," he continued, raising his unconscious friend and fanning him gently, "me an' Shorty had good jobs with cattle outfits down south of Salt Lake, an' we seen advertisements offerin' expert ropers year-round jobs with some kind of a circus or somep'n. It said to write, but we didn't figure that was necessary. We just took our ropes an' hit the rattler. Come to the feller's address in Noo York, an' all it was was a kind of an office. I dunno just how it was supposed to work out, but the idea was that you paid this guy money, instead of him payin' it you. He didn't have no circus. That was why he wanted you to write. Well, by the time Shorty and me was through with him he didn't have no office, neither, an' mighty little countenance that his mamma would have recognized. Well, if you'll believe it, they arrested us, an' in spite of the fact that this guy had done us out of nigh on six months' wages in railroad fares, an' twenty dollars would have paid all his doctor's bills, it was us the judge picked on.

Thirty days each, an' he said that if we hadn't bin poor, ignorant Westerners he'd ha' soaked us a lot more. 'Pears the way to do back East here, when a guy's got a lot of your jack off'n you, is to go an' pay more jack to lawyers on the off chance of gettin' it back. Rotten system, I call it. Ever run up against it yourself?"

"You bet your life," said Peter, relieving the big man at the fanning of Shorty. "But if you're just out of jail for violence, what's the big idea of jumping on my neck? That's a good way to get back."

"That was just our idea," said the big man, "to get back—home. We ain't had anythin' to eat since we got off the Island, an' there ain't anybody that'll employ us to do anythin', apparently, so we got desperate. The way to get money without workin' for it, here, seems to be to get a tin cup an' pretend you're blind, but me an' Shorty didn't seem able to stomach that, so we figured to pick out a guy just about as well dressed as the jasper that swindled us, an' take what we needed off him in a straightforward manner. I figure it's no use tryin' to fight these Easterners with their own weapons. They're used to them an' we ain't. You don't see any of them comin' West an' tryin' to win fame an' fortune competin' with us Westerners at shootin', ridin', or ropin', do yuh? Not much. They stick to their own weapons—finances an' six per cent an' all that. Well, s'long's I'm in the East, I'm goin' to fight for my livin' the way I'm accustomed to."

Shorty brushed his hand across his eyes.

"Are we at Chicago yet, Red?" he asked sleepily. "Gosh, I dreamed we had a train wreck!" Memory returned to him. "Hey, Red," he complained, "I thought you said these Easterners wouldn't figure on havin' their jack took offn 'em honestly! Lookit that guy!"

"He's a Westerner," said Red sadly.

"What, in them duds? Hey, mister, where you from?"

Peter made no answer. His brows contracted in a frown, he was staring at the gold cap of the Obelisk, which shone dimly in the moonlight.

"Mister," said Red, pulling at his trouser leg, "our little invalid here's askin'—say, you ain't hurt, are yuh?"

Peter woke up.

"No—I'm just thinking," he said. "Something you said kind of made me think. Seems to me I've been making a big mistake."

For a moment he stared at Red and Shorty thoughtfully; then put his hand in his pocket.

"I'm going to fix you boys up with chow and a place to sleep," Peter said slowly. "No—it isn't charity. You've just given me a big idea, and you may have to help me work it out. I want to have you handy."

"Steak!" muttered Shorty hungrily as he rose to his feet. "Smothered in onions! Say, mister, will it run to onions, d'yuh think?"

"What's the big idea?" asked the more cautious Red, taking in his belt four holes in case of disappointment.

"Why," said Peter slowly, "I've been kidding myself that I'm just as good an Easterner as the people that've lived here all their lives. I've been trying to fight them with their own weapons."

He handed Shorty one ten-dollar bill and Red another. They noticed, in the moonlight, that his eyes were dancing strangely.

"That's the first installment of your pay for giving me the idea that I've been all wrong. The way to fight the devil isn't with fire; you can't catch a fish by swimming after him; and who'd try to lick a steer by tying on horns and charging on all fours?"

"Nobody!" said Red.

"Accordingly, with your kind assistance," said Peter Martin grimly, "the next round of my battle with these East-

erners will be fought strictly à la Denver and points west!"

## CHAPTER V.

ON the morning of Saturday, the fateful day on which the note fell due, the desk clerk of the Grosvenor spoke to the manager of the hotel as that worthy passed on his way to breakfast.

"It's all right," he said mysteriously, "about two hundred and twelve."

The manager's eye brightened.

"Has he paid up?" he demanded.

The clerk shook his head.

"No. Say, we nearly made a mistake about that guy. I had a sort of idea myself he was a dead beat. Those swell clothes somehow didn't seem to go with him. But he isn't; he's a Westerner—big mining guy or something. Rolled into the lobby yesterday in a bally white sombrero and—well, I don't know what else he had on, but he looked Western, all right. Then last night he got a registered letter from a bank out there—came over from somebody at the Biltmore. And this morning he phoned down that if any letter came for him from a firm of lawyers we were to get it to him at once, wherever he was. And one place he's going to this morning is the Henderson Mining Corporation. I see by the papers there's a directors' meeting there to-day."

The manager nodded.

"Give him anything in the house," he said.

"Then again, last night," pursued the clerk, "he had a couple of regular rough-necks call on him—cow-punchers or something. Had 'em up and chinned with 'em for the best part of two hours. No dead beat'd dare have people dressed like they were come around."

Again the manager nodded.

"I saw 'em," he agreed. "Say, cash his checks up to five hundred dollars, and be careful about his bill. These guys have got eyes like hawks. I re-

member one time I took a man from Nevada for a boob, and——"

Up in room 212, while the manager continued his reminiscences, Mr. Peter Martin, fresh from the shower bath and busy with the tying of a white silk four-in-hand designed to hang gracefully over the bosom of a khaki silk shirt, whistled tunelessly through his teeth as he regarded the bank letter which had so increased his prestige.

As is the way with letters from banks, the exterior had been more pleasant to the eye than the interior. For in courtly language Major Carter informed his old friend the colonel that while the bank was willing to stretch a point on its knowledge of the colonel, and on the major's personal recommendation, some security more substantial than a mere geological guess must be forthcoming. If shipments of ore from the mine could begin—if only one trainload of the alleged main-lode ore could be actually dispatched, something might be done. Until then ore was actually on the rails, however——

Peter got his tie to his liking, strolled over to the telephone, and spoke.

"No sign of that lawyer's letter yet?" he asked.

"Sorry, no, Mr. Martin," the desk clerk replied. "Is there anything we could do in that connection?"

Peter's eyebrows raised themselves half an inch.

"No, thanks," he said. "Except that when a couple of men call for me, you might ask them to wait down there, and call me. They'll be here before eleven—I've an appointment then."

"The appointment at eleven is the Henderson directors' meeting," the clerk informed the manager a moment later. "Ain't I the swell little guesser?"

He was, and he was not. For Peter Martin was going to attend the directors' meeting, not as the honored guest of the clerk's imagination, but as a desperate man making a desperate play at

the eleventh hour and the fifty-ninth minute. Yesterday Peter had called Henderson on the telephone, and told him there were certain facts he would like to bring to his notice before the note was finally disposed of. Henderson had suggested that he bring himself and his arguments down to the directors' meeting; also, that he prepare himself for a disappointment.

"I don't know what the facts are," Henderson had snarled, "but they'll have to be world beaters. You're not going to plead old Lockhart's illness, are you?"

"He's worse than he was," Peter had replied gravely. "I thought of mentioning it."

"Listen. Get this. My associates on the board are hard men, but I'm harder. I don't think any of us are liable to be impressed, whether one old guy dies or not. I'm not, at least. And it's my signature that's necessary for a renewal. Now, do you want to come down?"

"Yes."

"All right," Henderson had snapped. "Then waste your nickel if you want to. Eleven sharp."

However, it was at a cost of four dollars for a taxicab, and at twenty minutes past eleven, that Peter, closely followed by Red and Shorty, entered the outer office of the Henderson Mining Corporation. The fresh office boy was, of course, no longer there, and the elderly man who had taken Peter's place at the desk was courteous. Respect, in fact, was visible on the faces of all within the office as their eyes rested on the conspicuous white Stetson which had absorbed Peter's last twenty dollars, and on the concomitant silk shirt and typical baggy jacket. With a grim smile, as he gave his name, the young man reflected that the proverb about imitating the Romans when in Rome didn't go for New York at all.

"Mr. Henderson left orders that you were to be admitted to the directors'

meeting, Mr. Martin," said the elderly man, "but he didn't mention—er——"

Evidently in New York the thing to do was to stand outside this twopenny-halfpenny barrier while you stated your business and explained yourself. What, Peter asked himself, would he have done in a similar situation in the West? Why, he would have stepped over the low railing and cut short the discussion by walking in to the directors' meeting.

He accordingly did so here.

"Friends of mine," he said carelessly to the elderly man, as Red and Shorty gravely followed him toward the closed door. "I'll explain to Mr. Henderson." Then in a low voice to his companions, "Ready?"

Shorty's hand traveled rapidly to the rear of his trousers; Red patted his hip and smiled. Both nodded.

From inside the room, as Peter turned the handle of the glass door, came the sound of a shrill voice.

"I don't care what you say, Henderson," it cried. "This stuff's dangerous. I don't know whether there could be trouble at law about it, but some of these Westerners——"

The door swung open, admitting Peter and his two friends. Silently Red closed it behind them, and remained with his vast body obscuring the portal. Peter, with Shorty at his heels, advanced to the table in the middle of the room, laid his white Stetson on the mahogany, and gazed in turn at each of the six men surrounding the board.

"Yes?" he asked a small, pasty-faced fat man, whose mouth had been jammed open by surprise in the act of speech. "You were saying—'some of these Westerners——'"

Suddenly, from over Peter's shoulder, the rasping voice of Shorty cut into the proceedings.

"You take your hand off'n that bell button!" he snapped at Henderson. "Quick!"

An instant later, his hand under the

tails of his coat, the little man from south of Salt Lake had stepped in front of Peter Martin. He fixed Henderson's eyes with his own, which were strangely narrowed, and the financier's hand stopped in mid-air. For the moment, in fact, it seemed that the whole board of directors had been struck by some force capable of arresting animation. They sat perfectly still. They scarcely seemed to breathe; their jaws, mostly decorated by three or more chins, sagged over their collars.

The first sound was from the pasty-faced man who had been speaking.

"D-d-don't k-k-k-kill me!" he moaned. "I d-didn't d-do it! Oh, my God, Henderson——"

"Shut up," snarled the magnate at the head of the table. "Can't you control yourself? They daren't do anything."

Peter Martin seated himself at the opposite end of the board and shook his head indulgently.

"You're wrong," he said gently. "Quite wrong, Mr. Henderson. In fact, the only jasper here that's really right so far is the wailing coyote yonder. He's never seen me dressed up in New York togs, trying to play the New York game—like a fool—and so he looks at me now, and takes me at face value. And he's right, Mr. Henderson. Face value is my middle name. These are the clothes I'm used to wearing, and this is the way it's natural for me to act. So if you've got any idea that I'm doing any fancy-dress stuff, drop it!"

Henderson paled a little. The blue pockets under his puffy eyes stood out more distinctly.

"What do you want?" he said thickly.

"I want," said Peter quietly, "that you should renew that note of Colonel Lockhart's for another seven days."

The blood that had receded from Henderson's face rushed back in a purple flood.

"I won't!" he roared, thundering his fist down on the table.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Peter advised him. "Anyhow, you might wait until I'm through with my argument. Out West there's a kind of unwritten law that when a man's old, or when he's sick, his obligations are let to ride, as it were. Guess we got that idea from watching the wolves we have out there. When an old wolf gets sick, the rest of the pack turn on him and tear him to pieces. We didn't much want to be like wolves, so I guess we figured to do differently."

"We aren't in the West now," snarled one of the directors.

Peter looked at him. So did Shorty, the hand still on the hip. So did the saturnine Red from his post by the door.

"I—I—I——" babbled the director suddenly.

"When you say you're not in the West now," Peter told him slowly, "you're right, and you're wrong. Geographically, you're in New York City. Socially speaking, you're a long way past Chicago, and still traveling. Because, wherever you happen to be sitting, you're dealing with a Westerner, and I don't want you to forget it. Shorty!"

"Uh-huh?"

"Say somebody gyped an old man that was a friend of yours into a contract that he couldn't live up to anyway, and then took advantage of the old man's being sick to grab something of his worth a million dollars, for nothing almost—what would you do?"

"Me?" asked Shorty.

"Yes," Peter said, drumming gently with his fingers on the table. "You personally."

"I'd kill him!" said Shorty.

"How about getting hanged for it, or something?"

Shorty drew a long breath through his teeth.

"Well," he said slowly. "What about it?"

A shudder convulsed the board of di-

rectors. The pasty-faced man groaned from the bottom of his soul.

There was a long interval of dead silence.

"Do you know, I feel very much that way myself," said Peter slowly, "and that's what I've come here to tell you gentlemen. Mind, I'm not saying that you'll either sign that extension of time or be killed. I'm not making any threats. There are six of you here, and there are three of us. You're Easterners, and we're from the West. There's a question up to us both, in different ways. Your chairman there, Henderson, has told me that question's got to be acted upon to-day. Well, now, it's up to you to act on it. Do just as you feel like. All I'm telling you is that you mustn't blame us if we claim the privilege of acting the way we feel like, too."

He rose to his feet. Red, in answer to a glance, left the door and strode forward, his hands on his hips.

"For God's sake, sign it, Henderson!" moaned the puffy man with the shrill voice. "Sign it! Sign it! They'll kill us!"

Henderson stared at Peter, and Martin, immobile with his supporters to each side of him, stared back. The eyes of the other directors, fixed on the three grim men in the unfamiliar clothing, bulged glassily.

"I won't——" began Henderson.

As if with one motion, the right hands of Peter, Shorty, and Red slipped upward to their hips.

Surely never before did a hand movement of perhaps six inches produce such a panic in Wall Street! Most of those present had watched, in the curb market, wigwag signals which meant the gain or loss of thousands of dollars, without turning a hair; but when three financially negligible persons made a movement they had not seen before, they with one accord grunted, gurgled, or screamed, according to their several

natures, and flung themselves on Henderson.

"Sign it! Sign it! They're going to kill us!"

Shorty's voice cut through the babel.

"Don't touch that bell button, Henderson!"

"If he won't—sign—it," gasped the pasty millionaire, "let's vote him out of office. I put it to the vote. Those in favor——"

"Aye! Aye! Oh, my God—they're going to kill us——"

"Will you," asked Henderson of the pasty man, "agree to indemnify my ward if anything goes wrong?"

"Of course I will!" screamed the coward. "I'll pay her a hundred thousand——"

"Then I'll sign."

Drawing the document in question from among the pile of papers before him, he scrawled an indorsement, signed with a flourish, and threw the paper across the table to Peter, who examined it, signed his name as agent for Colonel Lockhart, and threw it back.

The board of directors gave vent to a composite sigh of agonized relief.

At that moment Shorty and Red simultaneously withdrew their hands from their hip pockets. Each drew forth a stick of tobacco, into which he bit with relish. Peter, making a similar motion, produced a muslin sack and a packet of cigarette papers. He smiled.

"I am obliged to you, gentlemen," he said, turning toward the door. "Good day!"

The board of directors snarled with rage. Henderson quieted them.

"You think you will be able to meet this note next Saturday at this hour?" he asked Peter, with an evil smile.

"I think so."

"I don't!" said John P. Henderson. "Good day!"

And on Monday morning Peter learned the meaning of those words.

In response to an urgent code wire, sent late on Saturday night, urging double shifts at the Virgin Mine and the quick dispatch of the trainload of ore which would serve as a basis for Major Carter's loan, the superintendent wired back to Peter:

Sorry all work tied up by strike on orders of Henderson mine picketed fear bad trouble what shall I do Williams.

With this the room clerk sent up to Peter the long-expected letter from the Los Angeles lawyers.

Torn open by trembling fingers, the envelope yielded a message to the effect that, due to causes beyond the lawyers' control, no remittance could be made for another two weeks at least.

## CHAPTER VI.

If Hades City was repulsive by night, it was beyond comparison more so by day; and it reached its nadir when, as on the Thursday following Peter's interview with Henderson in New York, circumstances liberated the mine workers to lounge away the day in the baking streets. The houses in Hades City were built of unpainted boards, knocked together without the aid of plumb or level; the roofs were of galvanized iron, whose thick coating of rust seemed to give it no insulating properties against the heat.

A local wit had once said that if Hades was the oven, Hades City was the fireless cooker. He had based this observation on the chronic state of the thermometer, indoors and out, from April to October; but the inhabitants had suspected him of an allusion to their personal appearance, about which they were justly sensitive, and the wit had been buried just back of the Here's How tea house. He had been a stranger, anyway, and Hades City was a close corporation.

Strangers, as Con Meyer had frequently told the town's population, were



always liable to flash badges, pull guns, wave bits of blue paper signed by judges, and otherwise act as though Hades City were amenable to the same laws as other places. Whereas, having been brought to its present state of prosperity by the Henderson Mining Corporation, Hades City could obviously be expected to obey only such regulations as the Henderson Corporation might promulgate or approve.

The laws of the United States, for instance, frowned upon such proceedings as were engaging the attention of the city on this torrid Thursday afternoon, whereas the Henderson Corporation not only approved, but ordered them.

Con Meyer, seated at the head of a long table in the Here's How tea room, temporarily converted into a sort of campaign headquarters, was dividing his attention between a dust-stained ruffian who had just swaggered in from the street and a code wire which had been handed in on lower Broadway.

"Did you see Williams?" he snapped, knitting his brows over the combination 679hg07b. "What did he say?"

The newcomer shifted his holsters so that their tied ends would not dig in his knees, and seated himself.

"It wasn't so much what he said," he answered, "as what he did. I went up to him as gentle as a lamb, Meyer, and politely told him what you told me to. Said we'd give him twenty-four hours more, and then blow the whole bunch of them off the face of the earth. Well, Meyer, he was walking up and down that barricade he's run up, nursin' that sawn-off shotgun of hisn, and when I said that he turned to all them tame miners he's got corraled, and asked them if they were goin' to sit still and stand for that."

Meyer looked up from his telegram.

"What did they do?" he asked sharply.

"They sort of kind of growled,

Meyer," the ruffian responded, "in a manner which I personally didn't like. If it hadn't bin for that rawboned guy you smuggled in with 'em—that stool-pigeon feller—gettin' up an' stayin' they was bound to be true to the cause of American labor, I believe they'd have went over to Williams' side right then."

"What happened after that?"

"Why," said the messenger, "Williams turned to me an' the two guys that went with me, and asked us to show our union cards."

"Well?"

"Well, that red-headed guy you sent with me give a yell of 'I'll show you my union card, you old blankety blank!' an' pulled a gun. An' of course Williams plugged him in the legs with the shotgun, an' then covered me an' the other feller, an' told us to git out, which we done. As we went, we could hear him givin' an oration to the bunch about did they want to throw in their lot with a lot of offscourings like us, an' all that. Way they groaned, he seemed to be kind of impressin' 'em."

Meyer shot out a forefinger at a gaunt blackguard decorating the other end of the long table.

"See what you've done, Schwartz?" he snarled. "That's gettin' drunk! If you'd bin on deck, we'd have had all those guys out of the mine an' down here in town before Williams could find out what happened. As it is, they're on strike, an' yet they're still right there at the mine!"

"They ain't workin'," growled Schwartz.

"Ain't workin'? No, they ain't workin'. But what kind of a fix are we in? That old devil of a super's got 'em penned inside the barricade, an' he's cached all the firearms an' explosives except what he needs to keep 'em in order. An' while he holds 'em buffaloes with a shotgun an' a stick of dynamite he's preachin' to 'em. A little while more, an' they'll start in again."

An' how we goin' to start anythin' with them there? They're just settin' pretty right now, but we start attackin' the mine, an' they won't set pretty no more. It'll be no use tellin' 'em then that we're holy liberators an' what not. They'll see us comin' with guns in our hands, an' they'll fight back. Henderson's goin' to be pleased with you, Schwartz! You've been worth your railroad fare from Butte here, I don't think!"

"Well, what we goin' to do?" asked another man.

"We can't do nothin'! An' at that we're euchred. Water an' food'll give out at the mine pretty soon, anyway, an' those guys are goin' to feel chummy toward us when they do, ain't they? It's all Schwartz's fault. If it hadn't have bin for him, we'd have had them sixty scabs down here in the streets, an' have strolled up an' taken the Virgin Mine by this time, like Henderson said we should. The idea was that we'd take it by violence in five minutes, an' it'd take old Lockhart a year to shove us out again by law, an' the ol' fool'd have gone broke long before then. What's happened? Why, they got two carloads of ore out and lyin' on the bank ready to be shipped, an' we're farther away from ownin' the mine than ever. I hope that what Henderson's got on you ain't serious, Schwartz, because I bet you when he hears about this he'll throw you to the dicks."

Schwartz' dark face paled.

"We got the railroad tied up—they can't get their stuff loaded into the cars anywhere on this branch," he growled defensively.

"Shut up!" snarled Meyer. "Close your head, will ya? I got to read this telegram."

Watching the leader's face, which wore, at the beginning of the reading, a portentous scowl, Schwartz and the other men seated at the table were relieved to note a gradual lightening of the somber expression. Halfway

through the code message, one blunt finger on the telegram, another between the pages of his code book, Meyer looked up and grunted almost amiably. A few words further on, it actually seemed as though he were going to smile, and at the end of the message he suddenly emitted a roar like a delighted bull and leaped from his chair.

"By the great horn spoon," he shouted, waving the telegraph form, "he's coming! *He's* coming. Old man Lockhart's comin' West sick, an' that guy Martin's comin' with him. He's in cahoots with Lockhart some way, an' he's comin' West to settle this yer strike himself! That guy!"

Slowly, like a snake uncoiling, Schwartz half rose.

"You say Peter Martin's comin'?" he repeated.

Meyer looked at his lieutenant.

"Oh—he punched you, too, didn't he? I didn't think you were here then."

"My first night. He's coming to settle the strike, is he?"

Meyer's eyes narrowed. He wanted to hurt Peter Martin himself; he wanted to get him down and beat his face into a bloody pulp with a revolver butt or a rock, but he did not want to kill him. No. Killing was another matter. But if he could do the beating, and leave the firing of the fatal shot, or the swinging of the knife, to some one else, that state of affairs would be ideal.

"Yeah," said Meyer slowly, "he's comin' to settle the strike—an' to be settled. You know, when he left here he was kind of refined, an' we called him the Easterner. Well, he got bravely over that in New York. Seems he went an' held Henderson up in his own office, an' Henderson couldn't have him pulled because the holdup was only a fake. I guess he'll carry a gun when he comes to talk to us, though."

"He'd better!" said Schwartz. "I carry one!"

"We all do," Meyer smiled. "But I

guess he's kind of forgotten us. Last time we met, he had it all his own way. *We weren't actin' under any orders that night. Get me?"*

The men around the long table grinned evilly.

"Thinks he's the ideal Western two-gun guy, does he?" asked one of them. "Comin' down to confute the dirty strikers single-handed. Must tha' bin seen' the movies!"

There was a snigger. In the midst of it, a shrill voice from the door cried, "Telegram!" and a barefooted boy brought in another message to Meyer.

The thick thumb ripped open the envelope.

"He-he-he!" yelled the big man. "It's from him! Sent from Copper City—railroad station. He's comin' to confer with us! He-he-he! Hark at this: 'Arrivin' Number Seventeen to confer on strike kindly have men's leaders available Petter Martin.' It's addressed to the strike organizer. That's me, all right. Say, boys, are you-all goin' to be available?"

"Considerin' that Seventeen's due in twelve minutes, I guess we are," growled a man who had not yet spoken. "Do we meet him at the station?"

Meyer chuckled.

"I should say not. Let him come to us. We're the leaders of the men, we are. Say, we'll sit in bloomin' state, like regular labor leaders. Shift away from the table, you guys, and get the chairs in order. There's one, two, three—five of you. I'll sit at the head of the table here, an' three of you can sit down this left-hand side. That'll leave room at the chairman's right for Mr. Peter Martin, esquire. Try it out once."

Amid grins from the loungers in the room, the men took their places, leaving unoccupied the chair at Meyer's right hand. Meyer himself grinned down the board.

"Now, listen," he said. "Some put the guest of honor on their right hand

just to show him how good he is. D'you know why I do it?"

Suddenly he sent his vast left fist whizzing through the space above the empty chair.

"Because," he explained, "my left's the arm I swing with, an' that's goin' to be the signal for the meetin' to break up. I figure he'll be surprised. I'll let him get just so far in respectful silence, an' then I'll hit him once. An' when he's down on the floor——"

Schwartz drew in a long, hissing breath.

"Yes," he said. "Then I'll speak to him a little."

"No, you won't!" snapped Meyer. "You won't speak to him until I say you can. You fool, you want to spoil everything again? Why, he's the only thing that'll fix up your other boner. When we got him down, don't you think we can kind of prevail upon him to tell old Williams to lay aside the shotgun an' give up the fort? An' when he's done that——"

Deliberately the big leader polished his broken nails on the cuff of his shirt.

"After he's done that," he added meaningly, "why, I don't care if he goes home or stays here or what he does. So long as he don't make trouble for us or anything."

"He won't make trouble," said Schwartz grimly. "I'll answer for that."

There was a moment's silence.

"S'pose he asks what the strike's about?" demanded one of the men.

"Why, it's about him employin' scab labor at the Virgin Mine—or old Lockhart doin' it, or, anyhow, its bein' done," said Meyer. "Tell him that."

"Suppose he wants to know what union authorized it?"

Meyer grinned.

"That'll be the time I hit him. What's the matter with you over there by the window?"

"Seventeen's comin' round the curve!"

"Then all you bums get outa here!" shouted Meyer. "All that ain't sittin' at this table—outside. An' lay around the streets lookin' like strikers, hear me? Williams ain't bin able to send any telegrams since Friday night, an' this feller that's comin' won't know but what we got all the men away from the Virgin outfit. In fact, he thinks we have, an' that's what he's comin' to confer about."

"Oh, say——" began one of the men at the window urgently.

"Git out!" shouted Meyer. "G'wan! Not another word. Skidoo!"

"But——"

"Are you goin'?" asked the big man, half rising, "or do you want to be helped? Go an' look discontented—outside!"

The room was left to the strike committee; and for the five minutes elapsing between the sound of Number Seventeen stopping, and the first clang of the bell as the train resumed her way, not a word was said. All at the table were listening.

Then:

"Say," asked one of the men suddenly, "you said he was comin' with old Lockhart. If Lockhart's sick, where's he goin' to leave him while he talks to us? May be takin' him home first!"

"Go 'n' look outa the window an' see if he's comin'!"

The man addressed shambled across the room. For a moment he stared through the dingy panes in silence, and then he gave vent to a stifled oath.

"I thought you said it was this Peter Martin guy!" gasped the man at the window.

"Well, ain't it?"

"Come an' look!"

Crowding to the side of the lookout, the conspirators stared down the one street of Hades City, which led directly from the railroad station, past the Here's How, to become a sand track on the way to the mines. It was on the

juncture of this street with the single line of track that the eyes of the strike committee now focused themselves, taking in, after a moment of stupefied wonder, a sight which caused the men to explode into whispered oaths.

Deducing the manner of Peter's return from the manner of his departure, those present had imagined that he would step into Hades City out of a day coach or, at the wildest estimate, out of a Pullman car. Instead of which, there loomed on the tracks, parked square across the road with an imperial disregard for lesser traffic, the sleek, luxurious form of a private car, cut off Number Seventeen and left to be picked up by any other train to which its master should deign to desire it attached. John P. Henderson had a private car, and by association of ideas the sight of this private car, though they knew it to contain a man whom they had planned to wipe off the face of the earth, gave the men at the window very much the kind of subdued feeling which afflicted them when Henderson himself was present.

"What t'hell——" muttered one of them.

They had seen John P. Henderson alight from his car several times since Hades City had been the field of his ambitions, but what was going on at this private car was new to their experience. As soon as his car was cut off the train Henderson would hurry down the steps and bustle up the main street.

From this car, surely, a man was alighting, a tall man in a gray suit, wearing a gray derby hat slanted slightly forward over one eye. But he was apparently in no hurry, and he was not Peter Martin. Nobody knew exactly who or what he was, though, as in the case of the private car, there was something about his appearance which was familiar to the watchers, and which gave them a certain chill. It was not until the man in the gray suit placed

a hand under his coat tails, withdrew it as if satisfied, and then favored the landscape with an all-inclusive survey, that Schwartz spoke.

"That—that's a private detective!" he muttered. "Member that one Henderson used to carry around with him? This guy's actin' just the same. 'Member?"

"There's another one!"

The man in the gray suit had retired up the steps again and entered the car. A moment later he emerged, accompanied by two other men of about his own build, dressed in clothes which resembled his own only in their inconspicuousness, yet obviously, by their quiet, assured movements, of his own profession. They all wore their hats tilted very slightly forward and to one side, and, as they stepped out into the open, each went through the same exploratory, self-assuring motion of patting his hip. A moment later a fourth man joined them. Two to each side of the steps of the private car, these newcomers chatted nonchalantly among themselves, fixing Hades City, meanwhile, with careless and disparaging eyes.

"Here he——" began one of the committee eagerly.

But the next man to appear was not Peter Martin, either. It was a dapper personage in a frock coat and a top hat, who appeared to carry in his hand a small leather satchel. The appearance of this gentleman, who would have been identifiable as a lawyer on any main street in any large city, was sufficiently ridiculous. Lawyers do not usually travel to unknown and semitropical places in full morning kit—except at the special request of unusually well-paying clients, and as a matter of fact this particular lawyer had spent most of his time on the trip from New York playing poker in a pair of linen trousers and his shirt sleeves. Now, however, he stood under the blazing desert sun in a

rig designed to impress metropolitan juries, and the strike committee, faced with the unknown, trembled inwardly.

"That's a judge!" cried one of the men suddenly. "I know them frock-coated guys! The first thing they say's, 'Guilty or not guilty?' an' the next remark is, 'Ten years!' I'm gittin' outa this!"

Con Meyer's lips were a thin line.

"No, you ain't," he said.

Another man turned from the window.

"Say, Meyer," he growled, "you better remember that we didn't sign on to fight no standin' army. I know those guys with the bowler hats—I seen 'em in action. They carry automatic pistols, an' they shoot at the drop of a hat, an' if you happen to plug one of them in return, you get the chair."

Meyer sneered.

"They got you bluffed already, have they?" he asked. "Git back to the table, the whole of you! G'wan! Anybody show you a ghost an' you'd all pass right out, I guess. G'wan, you yellow dogs! Siddown!"

The committeemen sank protesting into their seats. Only Schwartz remained unimpressed by the sight at the depot.

"Listen to me," said Meyer, "you lot of chicken-livered women! This is *my* business. Henderson give the job to me, an' do you think I'd sublet it to the like of you? Don't kid yourselves. All you're here for is to *look* like a strike committee. Don't kid yourselves you got any votes or anythin'. I'm the guy—see? What I say goes, an' what I don't say don't go. You're dummies, an' so long as you sit still you won't get hurt. So sit still, you! Leave it to me!"

He was making, in his small way, the identical mistake which from the beginning of time has overthrown much larger empires than Hades City, and deposed many an emperor who would

have considered Con Meyer too mean a person to be accounted even a human being. Forgetting that his power depended entirely upon the coöperation of the ruffians about him, so used to being a tyrant that he failed to realize that his tyranny rested on a basis, not of his own prowess, but on the combined valor of all those under his command, he was practically dismissing his supporters and proposing to swing the world by the tail himself. Had he been brought face to face with the cold proposition of facing Peter Martin and the four armed detectives alone, Con Meyer would have given up the job as suicidal. But he was so accustomed to having any movement of his own fist or revolver duplicated by the fists and revolvers of a hundred other men, that he had come to believe the effects attainable by this combined action to be due to himself alone.

So, being himself unaffected to any great extent by the procession which was slowly advancing up the street, he considered all to be well. He sat and glowered at his associates with the contempt of a superman.

A knock fell on the door.

It had been Meyer's plan to let Martin wait some seconds before he gave him permission to enter, but the person who had delivered this particular knock was not Peter Martin, and he did not wait for any invitation. The door opened, and the detective in the gray suit entered, followed closely by his three associates. The four men said nothing. They merely looked at those present with a professional interest that made uncomfortable thrills chase each other up and down the spines of the committee, and took posts behind Con Meyer, and to the right of the empty chair.

The lawyer entered. Behind him came a young man—obviously a stenographer.

"There appears," said the lawyer,

gently breaking the dead silence, "to be an insufficiency of chairs. Doesn't there?"

One of the detectives tapped Schwartz on the shoulder.

"Sit somewhere else, my lad," he advised. "You, too, in the next chair. Now——"

He broke off suddenly and sprang into action.

Infuriated, and at the best of times unstable in intellect, Schwartz had burst all bounds of restraint. With an animal-like snarl, he shook off the familiar hand of the law on his shoulder, and with a lightning movement raised into view the revolver he had held in his lap. There was no explosion, however. Like a humanized vise, the hand of the detective closed about his wrist, twisted it skillfully aside, and with a sudden jerk sent the gun to the floor. Simultaneously, so that the clatter of the gun and the smack of the fist blended together, he hit the ruffian exactly one inch to the right-hand side of the point of the jaw. Schwartz gave a clucking gasp and dropped.

"Why, you——" growled Con Meyer in a way that made his supporters, familiar with that growl, to tremble in their seats.

But the detective was not familiar with it. He was brushing an invisible speck of dust off the lapel of his coat. Without ceasing this operation, he looked calmly at Meyer.

"You sit down," he suggested. "Sit down!"

There was a moment of tension, and then Meyer obeyed. He could not have told why he did so; but, for the moment, everything seemed strange to him. He had been reared amid scenes of violence; he was no coward; man to man, he would have declined to take orders from Jack Dempsey and the champion pistol shot of the United States rolled into one. But he was not used to delegated authority. He was not used to

the sensation of starting out to fight one man, and finding, instead, a man engaged by the enemy to do the fighting for him, while the enemy attended to more important matters.

In other words, Con Meyer was buffaloed, just as the members of the board of the Henderson Corporation had been buffaloed in their own board room. Peter Martin was using, to end this strike, just the reverse English on the trick he had used to get the note extended. Those had been Easterners; he had demoralized them by a surprise attack in the manner of the West. Upon these men, accustomed to straightforward, knock-down-and-drag-out negotiation, he was springing the unknown terrors of Eastern procedure.

The other man whom the detective had tapped on the shoulder rose hastily and evacuated his seat.

"I dunno that I can do much good here——" he babbled. "I think I'll just——"

"You sit down, too," said the quiet detective. "There's a chair over in the corner. You can fetch it."

Meyer half rose again.

"Say," he snarled. "Who's runnin' this strike, anyway? D'you figure you are, you——"

"Shut up," said the detective in the gray suit. "Here's Mr. Martin."

"My—good—Lord!" gasped one of the committee. "Oh, gee!"

No passer-by on Fifth Avenue would have found anything bizarre about Peter's appearance—unless, like these men, the passer-by had chanced to see Mr. Martin in prospector's costume, and just emerging from a singularly sanguinary fight. Then there would have been a contrast over which to gasp. For on that occasion Peter had worn a wide-brimmed hat, rather shabby, whereas he now wore a glistening top hat. He had been dressed, down to the waist, in an old serge coat worn over a khaki shirt stained with alkali dust, in place of

which he now sported a frock coat like the lawyer's, but a much better one, a white waistcoat above whose upper edges showed two thin lines of black, a collar that would have choked any man in Hades City, and a flowing four-in-hand held together by a narrow platinum ring.

He looked as if, instead of having traveled two thousand miles through a landscape continually growing hotter, he had just stepped out of New York City, where nobody totes a gun and the police are just around every corner. Neither his collar nor the gardenia in his buttonhole was wilted in the slightest degree, which was not surprising, since the gardenia had been in water until ten minutes before, and the collar had spent all its time in a collar box, while its present wearer had played poker with the lawyer in his shirt sleeves.

There was further to be noticed the astounding whiteness of his hands, and the knifelike crease down his light-gray striped trousers, also his beautifully polished and pointed shoes and his silk socks. But what paralyzed the committee was something quite different. As he paused in the doorway and looked at them, this man who had left Hades City only a few weeks before as a rugged roughneck felt in a vest pocket, raised his hand to his face, and stared fixedly at the strike committee through a monocle!

For one instant it was a toss-up whether the ruffians at the table should shiver or laugh, but at the end of that instant they shivered. Quite abandoning the pose of easy scorn which had marked his entrance, Peter Martin crossed to the table, seated himself in the chair left vacant for him, and sent a lightning glance around the table.

"Are all officers of this strike present?" he demanded in a voice of steel.

Nobody spoke. On the floor, Schwartz, to whose prostrate form

Peter had not vouchsafed a glance, groaned and scratched.

"I assume that you are," said the cold voice of this terrifying changeling from the East. "Well, I've only a few words to say to you. This strike will cease and determine to-day. Two cars will be loaded with ore and shipped to Copper City before three o'clock to-morrow."

He paused.

Con Meyer, almost inarticulate with fury, put out a shaking hand and laid it on the immaculate cuff of the frock coat.

"So you say, Mr. Peter Martin," he whispered hoarsely, "but you got to remember that we're the people that do the talkin' around here. We're the boys that say whether the strike shall go on or not. We're the guys that have the power behind us." His voice suddenly returned to him, a bull-like yell. "An' you come here talkin', and tryin' to bluff us with your——"

Again he heaved himself out of his seat and towered over the sitting dandy to his right. His fists were raised in the air.

"You come here——" he roared.

With a renewal of that chill of fear about their usually hardened hearts, the other men about the board noticed that Peter Martin, a scant eighteen inches away from Con Meyer's most devastating rage, did not move; nay, did not even look up. The only person that moved was the detective in the gray suit. He stepped behind Con Meyer and pressed something cold and hard into the back of the big man's neck.

"Sit down," ordered the detective unemotionally.

Peter Martin, apparently quite oblivious of his surroundings, was bending across to the lawyer, consulting over a document. As Con Meyer sank back into his chair, the rage that was his stock-in-trade checked upon him like a perspiration in a cold blast of wind.

Peter took the paper, read it through, nodded, and handed it back.

For perhaps thirty seconds there was not a sound in the room, save for the stertorous breathing of Meyer as, face flushed and eyes popping, he glared in turn at each of his supporters. Not one of them would meet his eye. They were not afraid of him; they were not interested in him. They knew his violent rages and the weight of his fist of old—nay, more, they had just seen both rage and fist stopped in mid-career. What puzzled them, what commanded their fearful attention, was this other man—this peculiar guy from the East. They did not know what he was liable to do next. They wanted to find out. So, ignoring their fuming leader, they stared at Peter Martin, who on his side ignored them entirely.

In fact, as if wearied by his long trip, he now covered his eyes with his hands.

"All right, Mr. Parvey," he said, "will you speak to them?"

The lawyer adjusted his nose glasses, coughed, glanced at the document in his hands, inquired by a lift of the eyebrows if the stenographer at his side was ready, and then looked with a judicial mildness around the strikers. They shrank from him. They had met that mildly judicial gaze, or one very like it, before, most of them, and as the man at the window had said, the experience had meant an extensive loss of liberty. They had considered, however, that judges were few and far between, and that a real he-man's chances of being brought before one by any practicable number of peace officers was small. But here they were up against a jasper that carried a judge around with him!

"I should like you all to understand," said this terrifying person gently, "that we are not offering you immunity from prosecution. In other words, I cannot promise that if you will do what my client wishes you to do we will not send you all to jail. To make such a promise



would be to compound a felony, under section nine of the criminal code of eighteen-ninety-eight. Hem! However."

However! However what? The criminal code of 1898! Prison!

"I ain't done nothin', mister," said the man who had earlier pleaded an appointment elsewhere, and who, only an hour previously, had been loud in claiming for himself the honor of dancing on Peter Martin's chest.

"H'm! No doubt you think so," said the lawyer, smiling, "but you are in error. Quite in error. My client is so far unable to advise me whether or not you have committed any acts of violence in pursuance of your felonious object, namely, the fomenting of a strike or civil disturbance as defined in subsection fourteen of section twenty-four of the criminal code. Let us suppose you have not. In that case, you are merely guilty of conspiracy in the manner and for the objects aforesaid, and liable severally and each and all of you to fines of five thousand dollars or imprisonment at hard labor for not more than ten years, or both."

"My God!" gasped the man who had pleaded innocence.

Con Meyer chuckled.

"I suppose every strike gets its leaders sent to jail?" he snarled. "Huh? Tryin' to bluff us, are you?"

"There are special precedents covering nominal conspiracy by union leaders," said the lawyer gently. "Are you union leaders?"

Meyer hesitated.

"Yes!" he shouted. "And now what about it?"

"Can you prove it?" asked the voice of Peter Martin sleepily.

The men about the table held their breath. This was the moment at which Con Meyer had promised to knock Peter backward out of his chair and stretch him senseless on the ground, to be picked up at leisure and bent to the

committee's will. He remembered the promise quite as clearly as did his supporters, and, his great fist clenched, he looked first at Peter Martin, sitting there within easy reach of a blow, and then over his shoulder at the waiting detectives. The right hand of the man in gray was now in his jacket pocket, like the right hands of the other three detectives, and his eyes were fixed on Meyer's face.

With a grunt, the big man relaxed his muscles. With a hissing of released breath his supporters let out their former opinion of him.

"Suppose I can't?" Meyer asked.

"In that case, and as I should be able to prove to the satisfaction of any court, you have been conspiring as private citizens to use illegal means in restraint of trade, the penalty for which, as I said, is a fine of five thousand dollars, or imprisonment for ten years, or both. If, however, you have so much as broken the skin on the little finger of one of the agents of the owners of the Virgin Mine, you are liable to imprisonment for fifteen years at hard labor, without the option of a fine."

"Mister——" began one of the men pitifully.

"Silence!" roared Con Meyer, thundering on the table with his fist.

For an instant, between the devil of his leader's wrath and the deep sea of legal punishment, the man hesitated. According to a rule much older than Shakespeare, he decided to brave the peril that he knew, rather than fly to others that he wotted not of.

"Mister," he cried, "don't lump us with him! I'm telling you! He's the guy that doped it all out! He's the guy in charge. We're just here to give you the idea that this is a regular strike. It ain't. We're just dummies—he was sayin' so before you come."

Suddenly he broke off with a gurgie.

"Don't let that lad over there write down everything I say!"

The stenographer calmly turned over a page and wrote down the exact words of this plea, too. The speaker panicked. He looked at Peter Martin. Peter's eyes were still covered. He stared at the lawyer, who returned the gaze with a mild interest and an encouraging smile. There was no help anywhere, there was nobody to kill or beat up—there was nothing to be done but kick in and beg for mercy.

Aided by ejaculations from his fellow dummies, ignoring entirely, in his dread of the unseen tentacles of the criminal law, the more immediate threats and bellowings of Meyer, the terrified man stammered out all he knew.

"We ain't done any damage at the Virgin Mine," he said. "Mr. Williams and all the guys that were workin' up there are right there still. We heard they'd struck main-lode ore, an' we got orders from New York—at least, Meyer did—to go and take possession of the mine—"

"Twenty years," murmured the lawyer. "Section one hundred and nineteen, subsection four. Go on."

"But we didn't take it!" cried the confessor. "Old Williams had got hep somehow, and he'd closed up the barricades around the mine, and hidden all the men's firearms durin' the night, and was all ready to shoot us, while we didn't dare do nothin' on account of maybe hittin' some of the workmen he'd got in there, an' turnin' them against us. Meyer stopped them workin', but there's two carloads of stuff all out and ready, an' we ain't done any damage, honest to God, we ain't!"

"You have also interfered with the operation of the railroads, to wit, the siding connecting the Virgin Mine with—"

Before the lawyer could proceed to detail just what section this action had violated, and propound the number of years at hard labor which the terrible

Eastern law awarded therefor, another man arose. He was not in the grip of a panic such as had afflicted the previous speaker, but there was visible in his eyes, as he gazed at the mild little man who seemed to secrete about him such terrible things, a deep and abiding respect.

"I can fix that, all right," he said. "I didn't want the line monkeyed with, though Meyer wanted to dynamite it." "You lie!" snarled Meyer.

The cloth of the detective's coat pocket touched him gently in the spine. There was something hard and threatening under the gray tweed.

"If Mr. Martin'll—forget all this," said the railroad man, "I guess there won't be any delay gettin' his shipments through."

"Is that satisfactory?" asked the lawyer respectfully.

Peter did not raise his face from his hands.

"Oh, yes," he murmured. "That's all right. Meyer will, furthermore, leave town to-night, and will not return."

Disregarding entirely the admonitory pistol muzzle in his back, conscious only that some unknown force had stripped him of his power as tyrant of Hades City, and was now about to send him into exile, Meyer rose. At last, the fury which had kept Hades City in terror of him for months blazed forth, transporting the man beyond thought of revolvers, private detectives, and jails.

"We'll see about that!" he screamed, the veins in his brutal face suddenly showing purple against a livid white. "We'll soon see about that! You gas about your prison sentences—who's goin' to impose them? Goin' to arrest a whole city an' try it? Say, you've bluffed these poor goofs here, ringin' in all this Eastern stuff on 'em, but you ain't bluffed me, an' you ain't goin' to bluff anybody else. I'm goin' into the street an' see what the bunch thinks

about it. You won't buffalo them. They'll tear you to pieces!"

At a bound he had gained the door, flung it open, and stepped into the blaze of sunlight which illumined the dusty road. The fire of his fury came too late to heat those of his followers on whom fear of the law had laid its icy hand; but the whole population of Hades City, alarmed, threatening, sullen, clustered outside. They had not shared in the moral effect of that interview in the Here's How. They did not feel, as the men at the table felt, that no physical violence could avail against the invisible power wielded by these unknown quantities from the East. The men in the street had the perfectly correct idea that if they killed Peter Martin and his party it would be a long, long time before the distant courts, embarrassed by a total lack of evidence, and by Henderson's wealth, would be able to do anything.

"Boys——" shouted Con Meyer.

One spark in the powder barrel now, and not one of Peter Martin's entourage would leave town alive. If Con Meyer spoke, or if a bullet cut short his utterance, the powder would flare.

One of the detectives drew his pistol.

With a lightning movement Peter Martin knocked it out of his hand. With two long, noiseless strides he gained the doorway, and, in full sight of every one in the street, laid a manicured hand roughly on Meyer's shoulder. Then, as Meyer checked his utterance and spun on his heel, Peter swung the other fist upward to the jaw. It was a perfect uppercut, timed exactly, placed to the fraction of an inch, and backed by Martin's whole hundred and seventy pounds of bone and muscle. Con Meyer threw up his arms, sprawled in the dust of the roadway, rolled over three times from the force of that terrible blow, and then lay still.

"You men inside there!" called Peter, his eyes on the crowd in the street.

The other members of the strike board filed out.

"You can now join your friends," said Peter gravely. "And I shall be obliged if you will give them a full, true, and particular account of the mess into which your fallen leader there nearly led you."

"We will," said the man who worked on the railroad, grimly. "An'—say—that was some knock-out. Glad—glad you ain't entirely Eastern. Mind shakin' hands?"

Peter shook hands with him, then serially with the other four men.

"If Henderson doesn't like what you've done," he said loudly enough for the crowd to hear, "there'll be a lot of jobs at the Virgin Mine soon. We're going to extend operations. We're on the main lode, and the pay'll be good. Tell the boys that, too."

Five minutes later, when Peter started out with the lawyer, the stenographer, and the detectives to walk to Colonel Lockhart's house, that same crowd gave him a straggling cheer. They were rough men; they did not know exactly what had happened; but they could understand that this mysterious jasper in the high hat had won out against impossible odds, and, being Westerners, they gave him credit for it, friend or foe.

"One thing that puzzles me," said the lawyer, as he and his client turned in at the ramshackle gate of the colonel's house, "is why you covered your face with your hands back there. It impressed the men with your contempt for their violence, but——"

"I'm glad it did," said Peter gravely. "However, I hadn't figured on doing it that way. The fact of the matter is—I couldn't make that durned piece of glass stay in my eye, and I was scared that if I dropped it out they'd figure I never wore one before, and smoke the whole game."

They were on the steps of the porch. Old Matthew came to meet them.

"Cunnel want to see you, Mistah Martin, in his room at once. Say de matter very serious. Say fo' you to come at once."

The smile died off Peter's face.

"Didn't affect his heart, carrying him up from the train, did it?"

Matthew looked at the young man strangely.

"Nossuh. Didn't affec' his heart. His heart all right. No, 'tain't his heart you got need to worry about. Dis way, please!"

## CHAPTER VII.

"WELL, we won out!"

Colonel Lockhart received the tidings half sitting, propped by numerous pillows, in a vast colonial bed with pine-apples on the tops of its posts. It was rather surprising to find such a piece of furniture in the ramshackle frame house of the owner of the Virgin Mine, but far more surprising to Peter, as he stood in the doorway after firing off the glad news, was the expression of the bed's occupant.

When the private car had pulled out of Grand Central, Colonel Lockhart had been a very sick man; there had been a doubt in Peter's mind as to whether he would survive the long journey. Far from raising his temperature or exhausting him, however, the trip appeared to have brightened his aged eyes and given a strangely fighting-cocklike twirl to his gray mustache. Whereas the news of Peter's victory over the strikers, which the young man had considered would have a marvelously tonic effect, seemed, instead, to afflict the veteran with a certain disgust.

The eyes of the senior partner in the Virgin Mine fixed the resplendent junior partner coldly.

"We won out, did we? Well, suh, I am glad to heah it. But what I should wish to ask of you is——"

Peter took a rapid strike forward to the bedside.

"You want to know how, of course. Well, it was perfectly simple. I told you, on the train, how we got away with the extension of that note from Henderson. I was a sort of misfit in the East when I tried to be an Easterner, so I suddenly turned around and played Westerner there. Well, when this strike business came along, and threatened to tie us up so that we couldn't take up the extended note either—why, I thought I'd work the reverse English on the same trick. I wasn't enough of a Westerner to buck all these jaspers at their own game, but I was a better Easterner than the whole lot of them put together. So when Matthew came and told me that you had fifteen hundred dollars, and wanted to go home, why, colonel, I took a flier. I hired the private car, and then I spent every last remaining cent, and a considerable lot of money I haven't got yet, fixing myself all up like a white-waistcoated plutocrat. I had four detectives and a lawyer and a stenographer and a top hat and everything all complete. You know yourself I could have landed here with five hundred gunmen and have accomplished nothing—the strikers were all set for rough stuff. That's their specialty. But when the lawyer started reading them a lot of stuff about chap. four and section nine they didn't pause to wonder who was going to arrest them or anything like that. Henderson had never had a gun pulled on him before, and these guys had never before had a law read to them. They just naturally panicked."

"Very smart," said the colonel. "But what I should like to ask——"

"They've agreed to load the cars with ore and let them out," added Peter, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms, "and that will enable us to raise the loan from that friend of yours, and with that we can pay off Hender-

son's note, and by that time my money will be in our midst. Our worries are over, colonel!"

The colonel drew a deep breath.

"I am greatly obliged to you, suh," he said. "But—may I ask if you are now quite done with your remarks concerning the mine? Because I should like to ask——"

"Sure," said Peter. "That's all."

"Then I should like to inquire, suh, for the third or fourth time, suh," said the colonel in a voice trembling with indignation, "just what you have been doin', suh, to my favorite niece?"

Peter's jaw dropped.

"Why——" he began.

"Though in poah health on our trip here," said the colonel, "I was not too sick, suh, to notice that during the whole journey you spoke to her no moah than was absolutely necessary. Finally, I asked her, suh, the cause of this, and she informed me that you, finding that she, and not Henderson, held my note, had accused her of treachery to me. Mr. Martin, suh, I am surprised at you!"

"Well——"

"I am to blame, I admit. Instead of fightin' to the last ditch, and holdin' off surrender on that note to the last minute, as a Lockhart should have done, I permitted sickness, suh, and old age to make me travel to New York with the idea of a premature throwin' up of the sponge. This prevented my niece from informin' me of what she had done. Not, in any case, that it would have done any good, the scoundrel Henderson havin' tricked huh-into givin' him all powers of foreclosure or extension. This is beside the point, however. What I hold against you, suh, is that you actually suspected my niece of treachery, when, as she info'med me with tears in her eyes, she was just tryin' to save me by holdin' the note and thus making sure it would be extended."

Peter stared at the colonel, stricken.

"Moreover," went on the relentless old man, "you appeah to me, suh, to take consider'ble credit for this play-actin' expedition to Hades City. I admit that you' execution was masterly, but who do you imagine provided the fifteen hundred dollars cash money that brought us out heah?"

Peter half rose.

"I thought it was you!"

"My total assets," said the colonel gravely, "amounted to rather less than sixty dollars after my hotel bill was paid."

It was on the tip of the old gentleman's tongue to add something else, but, looking at Peter as he stood there, his face almost as pale as the now slightly wilted high collar, he refrained. After a moment, in fact, the old gentleman coughed and seemed inclined to smile. Catching the smile just as it was about to slip from under the corners of his mustache, however, he seized it with his teeth and bit it to death.

"Very sad condition of affaihs, suh," he remarked in a muffled voice.

Peter examined the interior of his top hat.

"I should like—er—if possible," he said, "to—er—see Miss Way and—er—apologize—er—before I go away. I—er—I think I'll—er——"

He looked up to find the colonel's eyes fixed on him with an expression quite different from that which they had held only a few seconds before.

"Permit me," said the old gentleman, twinkling, "to call you a young fool."

He extended a withered finger in the direction of a door leading from the bedroom.

"She's in there," he added in a conspiratorial whisper.

After Peter had entered the room, closing the door behind him with the soft carefulness of a man entering a dentist's office, the former commandant of the Seventeenth Kentucky Zouaves lay perfectly still on his pillows with

his eyes closed. A doctor, observing that he was smiling slightly, and that he scarcely breathed at all, might have thought he was in articulo mortis; whereas in point of fact he was merely breaking the tradition of seventy-odd years, and playing eavesdropper.

Matthew, entering the bedroom with a bottle of medicine, was as alarmed as the doctor might have been.

"What's matter, cunnel?" he cried.

The colonel opened one eye.

"I am endeavoring to overhear, Matthew," he said coldly, "what is being said beyond that door. After all the effort I have made, I think they might speak in higher tones. Anyhow, I won't have you interruptin'. Get out!"

Matthew rolled his eyes.

"Ain' goin' till I-gif you dis medsun, cunnel."

"Then sit down and shut up!"

There was dead silence in the bedroom. From the other side of the door came the apologetic rumble of a male voice. It ceased. There was no answering sound of the voice of Virginia.

The colonel's smile chilled, and he wagged his head protestingly on the pillow.

Peter's voice rose almost into audibility.

"—doing my best—treachery everywhere—hurt me to think it more than it did you—suppose you hate me—never see you again—anyhow—I love you!"

There was a long pause; then Virginia's voice came to the colonel's ears. It seemed to be advising Peter Martin to take his departure. There was another long silence, unbroken by the sound of Peter's footsteps approaching the door.

"In the South, where I come from," said Virginia's voice, with a strange in-

decision in it, "gentlemen leave at once when a lady requests them."

Another silence.

"My successes, so far," said Peter, "have seemed to come when I did exactly the opposite of what was customary in the section of the country where I was."

Another silence. Matthew examined an enormous silver watch.

"Five minutes late for medsun now," he grumbled. "Git on wif it, boy!"

"Do you want me," asked the colonel in a low, savage tone, "to get out of this bed and break your old black neck? Then shut up!"

He lay back, closed his eyes again, and listened.

"Since in the South gentlemen go away when requested," said the voice of Peter beyond the door, "suppose I were to act as if I came from Maine?"

There was no answer.

Suddenly the colonel sat bolt upright in bed.

"Matthew," he demanded, "did you hear that?"

The old darky, reaching for the medicine spoon, nodded his head.

"What," asked the colonel, "should you say it was, if you were asked?"

Matthew poured out a large and vicious dose.

"I should say, cunnel," he remarked, balancing the spoon for its downward travel, "that it sounded mighty like a kiss. Now open you' mouth—"

The colonel lay back on his pillows, and looked upward at the nauseous draft above him without apprehension. In fact, he was smiling more cheerfully than ever.

"That's just what it was, Matthew," he said. "And—listen! There's two more!"





## The Get-Together Club

**A**LMOST all of the discussions which have been carried on in this department have been by and between the readers of the magazine. Without exception they have been interesting and instructive—to the editors any way, and, we hope and believe, to the readers also.

A while ago we had a communication from one of our authors, Mr. Frederick C. Davis, in which he freely expressed his opinions on the subject of "literature." His letter was stimulating, especially to Mr. H. Keith Trask, who has contributed and is still contributing to PEOPLE'S some of the best railroad stories that we have ever read.

The whole of Mr. Trask's letter is enlightening. We would like to use all of the three pages in this department in talking about it. But of course we cannot do that, and we will have to confine ourselves to expressing our approbation of his reference to textbooks which, of course, embraces all instruction in short-story writing. Personally, we have no confidence at all in such pretended instruction, chiefly because almost all of it wholly ignores what is probably the first and last essential of the art. So far as we are informed, so-called teaching of short-story writing is confined to discussions of "technique." But of what use is "technique" unless there is some substance which may be molded by it? Training

of the pupil's faculty of observation would be of service to him; something to stimulate a flow of ideas would help him immensely. But where can you find anything of the sort either in colleges or in other "courses in short-story writing?"

The test of a teacher's value as a teacher is, as Mr. Trask suggests, his ability to do what he professes to teach others to do. Is any further comment necessary?

Here is Mr. Trask's letter. See what you think of it.

229 East Sixty-eighth Street,  
New York, October 14, 1922.

MY DEAR MR. SESSIONS: I rise to a point of interrogation inspired by the letter of Frederick C. Davis in the October 10th session of the Let's Get Together Club. He writes:

"The fact is, it simply does not pay to write 'good' literature exclusively."

As a colaborer in the vineyard with Brother Davis, very possibly using the same make of typewriter and an equally battered kitchen table, I feel privileged to query—Does it pay to write anything else?

Upon his own statements, I should say that it does not. To my mind the question hinges upon what constitutes good literature in the sense in which he means it, the magazine sense. A wide field for disputation lies before us, but we can reduce the acreage by admitting that "good" literature in the magazine sense does not necessarily imply material classing with Milton, De Maupassant, or Henry James; Mrs. Wharton or that often mystifying and always narrow compilation of twenty tales annually

pronounced the "best" of the year by our self-constituted Supreme Court of Short Stories, Brother O'Brien, of Boston—His Little Book.

For further simplification, we'll admit that a wholly new plot is rarer than good red liquor on an American-owned transatlantic liner and just about as valuable. Everyday workers like Brother Davis and myself must fall back upon the—thirty-seven, was it?—basic plots and infinity wherewith to multiply their variations. Roughly speaking we have one hundred and ten million people in these United States, and each one of them is good for at least one story, as the chief character, that is. If each were capable of the production of at least one story, Heaven help you—and us, who are doing the piece-work. There is also an infinite variety of local color, atmosphere, wherewith to frame the pictures.

The textbooks tell us a good deal more is required, technically speaking, but the lads who write the books don't seem to appear conspicuously in any magazine table of contents. It is difficult to judge how much of their own physic these wise doctors would swallow.

Given an original variation of one of the basic plots—which necessarily implies the power of creative imagination—an environment with which the writer is sufficiently familiar to fashion a convincing frame, a chief character whom readers will love like a brother or hate like the devil and lastly, but by no means leastly, a journeyman command of the everyday language of our country—which is by no means "English," if you are familiar with the tongue of our British cousins—and our pieceworker is ready to start the day's job. That is to say, he is supplied with material and tools to produce good magazine literature. And that I think has become a highly specialized bench job. Undoubtedly Brother Davis will agree.

Will he produce it if he is "feelin' blue?" Will he produce it if he doesn't believe that, to get over, it must be the best there is in him at a time when it is *fun* and not drudgery to punch his old machine? Will he produce it when he thinks that he must get this one in the last mail Saturday so that the check will show up in the first mail the following Saturday? Will he get a check at all if he argues that maybe this one isn't as good as the one Sessions had something nice to say about in "Let's Talk It Over," but it ought to get by?

He will not.

Last winter, I thought that I needed the money a little worse than usual. I wrote

seven stories in one day over five weeks. Basically, I had to hand all the ingredients I have enumerated above. None of those stories was less than six thousand words in length, several of them quite a little more. I might better have written one which would go over. They all came back. You yourself told me why several of them made the round trip. Your reasons were sound and illuminating, but they missed the vital defect. One lacked definition of plot. One—but what's the use of post-mortems?

You said a mouthful, but you missed the milk in the coconut—or perhaps it was tact. The boob who wrote them wasn't trying to produce good literature. He was after checks.

In the old days down on the Seaboard Air Line, whenever they received a new locomotive from the builders, the first thing they did was to hang the government boiler inspection certificate in the cab. The second was to stick up a sign in big black letters where the engineman had to see it unless he were asleep. It read:

#### SAFETY BEFORE SPEED!

When I sit down before my trusty tune box, I try mentally at least to keep before me a sign of my own which would read something like this:

#### GOOD STUFF GOES OVER—GOOD ENOUGH DOESN'T!

If I can't, if I'm "feelin' blue," as Davis puts it, I go out and spend some money instead of trying to earn any. I find it pays better when the income-tax return has to go in.

Before I yield the floor, let's settle this word literature. As Davis and I use it, it doesn't mean anything highbrow. It's a poor word anyway, almost as bad as journalist. Newspapermen say that animal changes his shirt only once in two weeks while they wear two a week. I've never tried writing "literature," good or bad. I have tried and still am trying to think up tales which will not only please our board of directors, the reading public, but will leave me with a satisfied sense of having given the best I had. That is the only kind of work it pays to do. This has been better said before, but it's so. It is also "good" work in the magazine sense, but it isn't literature.

Am I right, Brother Davis? Eh? A little louder, please—

Sure I am.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

H. K. TRASK.



In the last issue we printed a letter which contained some trenchant criticism of the views which Mr. John Edward Barnett had expressed in a previous issue of this department. We came in for part of this criticism, as you may remember.

Of course Mr. Barnett had not seen this letter when he wrote to us on October 17th, as appears below. He is writing now to emphasize what he said before and to show that his opinions are shared by others.

We wonder what he will have to say when he reads Mr. Boyd's letter in the issue of PEOPLE'S for November 10th.

CUMBERLAND, Md.,  
October 17, 1922.

The Editor, PEOPLE'S MAGAZINE, NEW YORK CITY, N. Y.

MY DEAR SIR: Several weeks ago, you were kind enough to give space to a letter. I penned (penned is right, my typewriter complained so much I gave it away—to a repairman) to your most honored self. That letter sure, as our colored friends say, "fetched the res-ults." Scores of letters, in fact nigh on to a truck load, have arrived at P. O. Box 251, from every corner of U. S. A., not to forget the Island of Yap. Each letter, in pictured phraseology, tells me "how interestingly you write, and how correct you were, on facts in fiction."

One letter in particular, from Miss Cecilia Greig, 1204 West Fifth Street, Fort Worth, Texas, puts into colorful language the very things, I, in my wretched letter to you, forgot to mention. Miss Greig says, "I am from the north, and if I pick up a story supposedly written about and around that country, and the author made some errors in his statements of climate or conditions, one would of course say, 'That's from some one not familiar with the north country.' I have read some stories of Northwest Mounted Police that would make the angels weep. On the other hand, the writer may give facts, facts, facts, until the whole plot is lost in a chaos of nothing but facts." It seems Miss Greig sounded the keynote of my argument on the literality of facts in fiction. She, like other writers of many of the letters I received, agreed on even pro-

portion of facts and fact and fancy, to make the story interesting, appealing and, above all, life as it is the universe over.

"One thing I think is that the public as a mass want and expect too much from their fiction authors," further states Miss Greig. The public, somehow, always anticipate considerable from writers, although that is natural; more evident, however, to a newspaper man, in my opinion, than any one else.

Having opened an important discussion, I am more than glad to know so many people agree with my views on fiction and fact. For once an alleged critic, writer, errand boy, ex-soldier, and press agent appears to be right in opinion. It's nice, indeed yes, to feel I shot at a one-hundred-yard target once, and "the guy in the butts," that flag-waving artist, did not wave a miss.

The fact of the matter is: Approximately forty of your regular readers claim I write interesting letters, and insist I write regularly. I am, I hope politely, showing the matter along to you—you tell 'em the editorial story—inform the gang—I don't have the nerve—being in all modesty a poor toiler in the Fourth Estate. And the editor frequently says: "Barney, why in the name of over-worked Goss presses don't you learn to write interesting copy once in your editorial career?" I can add this: "I still cling fast, and retain my job, broken typewriter, everything."

Sincerely,

JOHN EDWARD BARNETT.

P. O. Box 251.

Editor, PEOPLE'S STORY MAGAZINE, Street & Smith Corporation, New York City.

DEAR SIR: I have been intending for some time to write and tell you how much I enjoyed your mystery story "Find the Clock," by Harry Stephen Keeler. It kept me guessing up to the last minute, and I do wish you would have another story by Mr. Keeler soon.

I read your magazine regularly and consider "Find the Clock" your best story for 1922—so far—unless you have another one as good by the same man. The "suspense" element in the story was a wonder after one has been fed up on these quite "unmysterious" mystery stories that lots of the magazines now publish. Yours truly,

ESTELLE FRANTZ.

4736 Lake Park Avenue, Chicago, Ill.





# Let's Talk It Over

## "THE MISFIT MAN"

ARE you a square peg in a round hole? Or a round peg in a square hole? Or are you one of the fortunate ones who is satisfied and happy in his work and his environment? Do you love your job? Do you get pleasure and enjoyment in your life outside of your working hours?

There's no telling, of course, how many people there are in the world who are doing things for which they have no talent. A pessimist would assure you that such people are in an overwhelming majority, that those who are really fitted to their work are so few as to be practically negligible. An optimist will carry you to the other extreme.

But speculations like this are of no value especially, certainly not to the individual who is dissatisfied. And the misfit man is about as unhappy a specimen of humanity as can be found; he can never be really happy while his condition is unchanged.

The real question is, not how many such people there are in the world, but what such people do to alter their circumstances. It would pay somebody to find that out, for then a more or less simple rule might be discovered which would show others the way.

In the story in this issue under this title the man in the case, coming to the East out of the West, found that

he made no progress in his business so long as he followed Eastern manners and methods. So the bright idea came to him to pose as a Western man in the East and an Eastern man in the West.

Now we do not presume to say that this man's idea may be crystallized into a universal rule for the relief of round pegs in square holes, but there really is something in it which is of practical value.

After all, the curse of a misfit man is that he finds himself in a rut—a victim of routine. Change is his only salvation; and change may be had by means of a new point of view, by inventiveness, by initiation, by scheming to do the old duties in a new way, by being a Western man in the East and an Eastern man in the West, by surprising himself and his associates by the novelties of his methods.

There may be something in this. Try it out, anyway—it can't hurt you.

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### NOTICE.

PEOPLE'S date of issue to be advanced.

Next number out about December 5th.

Regular dates of issue to be 1st and 15th of the Month.

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has incorporated his remarkable food revelations in 12 simple lessons which he calls "Weight Control—the Basis of Health." And to enable everyone, everywhere, to profit by his valuable discovery, he offers to send his complete course on trial to any one sending for it.

You have always wanted to reduce weight, to attain the ideal weight for your height. Here is your opportunity to prove to yourself that you can do it, and without discomfort, without denials or sacrifices! Here is your opportunity to take off just as much flesh as you wish, and yet eat delicious foods, many of which you may now be denying yourself. And it need not cost you one cent to make the test.



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Mr. —, Detroit, Mich.

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